SUSAN ERTZ

Now East, Now West

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JOHN LEHMANN

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I

It seemed to George Goodall that he had already left New York—his birthplace, his home, almost his world—and for how long he didn't know. A year at least, perhaps two years. His feelings were those of a man temporarily suspended outside time and space. New York—though his feet were on its pavements—was behind him; Europe, remote, unknown, was ahead. At the moment it seemed to him that he was nowhere at all, and the sensation of being nowhere gave him a dull and uncomfortable heartache which he diagnosed as homesickness for a place he had not yet left.

New York. The name was as familiar to him as his own name—so familiar that it was meaningless. It was as much a part of him as the skin he was living in. It had never occurred to him as a serious possibility that he might some day live somewhere else. And now his regular daily existence which he had seen spread neatly about him, both before and behind, like a map, was in complete disorder. The future was fluid and formless, and even the familiar past seemed insecure. Those big, ominous trunks that stood packed, locked and labelled in the hall of their apartment in Park Avenue; the dinner the directors of his company had given him the night before; his wife's farewells to her friends over the telephone, or, less briefly, in the drawing-room; the bustle and excitement connected with a voyage—all these things made the pavements under his feet that evening seem unreal and strange to him.

It was nine o'clock, and he walked up Fifth Avenue in the May dusk toward his club, and thought that even Althea his wife and Cleve his son had taken on a new quality. He

had left Althea prone on the sofa in the midst of the horrible order she had wrought. It had been her aim and desire to leave the apartment in as neat and perfect a state as possible for their friends the Mertons, who were moving in almost at once, and George was impressed with her success. Now she was tired out, which was alarming in a young woman of her extraordinary energy. She had not been too exhausted, nevertheless, to busy herself even as she lay there with the reading over and the sorting out of the letters of introduction her friends had given her.

She was already arranging her life in London, deciding which doors she would like opened to her and which had better remain closed; while George, with his heartache, walked slowly and thoughtfully to his club, wondering if women had any roots at all, and admiring—and envying a little—their easy transitions from one life to another. Althea, in her own private mind, was already in London. She was seeing herself in some house there, going from room to room, looking out of the windows on an already familiar street. He couldn't picture London at all; but, of course, she had been there and he hadn't. He could only manage a tall black tower with a flag flying from it, which he labelled the Tower of London, and he pictured chop-houses with sawdust on the floors, and old and unpretentious tailors' establishments. To one of the latter he imagined himself going to order clothes, and standing with his coat off, being measured. Tailors always complimented him on his figure, some indirectly, some openly, and these English tailors to whom he went in his fancy were no exception. But what it would be like to live there, or to live in any other world but the world of the United States, he simply couldn't imagine.

His mother, a lively, superficial woman to whom Europe was a sort of Tom Tiddler's ground, had often been abroad during his youth, to return laden with spoils for herself, and with ties, socks and picture-postcards for him, at which last he never so much as glanced. Althea had been twice:

once before her marriage, when she had travelled with her father, irascible old Henry Cleveland—there was a shadowy Italian marquis in her verdant years, but Mr. Cleveland had stamped him out—and once again before Cleve was born, when she went with the elder Mrs. Goodall. George had not accompanied them himself because of the exactions of a fast-growing business, and because travelling abroad had always seemed to him a vaguely feminine practice. Althea's absence had not seemed so very long—no longer, indeed, than it actually was, for his friends had been kind and he had dined out nearly every night—but their separation had nevertheless made a faint difference in their lives. Althea had returned with exquisite clothes and a dampened enthusiasm for the circles in which she was obliged to wear them. She looked upon New York and their home there, that admirable apartment of eight rooms and four baths, as though they had faded and shrunk in her absence. She even made George feel, for a while, as though he too had faded and shrunk. She seemed to have added a cubit to her stature in some way, so that he was at a disadvantage, but that passed.

And then came the night—a month ago—when he had told her, among other casual items of downtown news, that the firm was sending Howard Peters to London. They would have to have someone there permanently now, he explained, the London business was getting too big and too important to be handled from New York. Althea had received this news in what seemed to him a preoccupied silence. She had the look of a woman who tries to do a sum rapidly in her head. Thinking she wasn't interested in what he was saying, he went on to speak of something else, but she interrupted him crisply:

"Why Howard Peters? What qualifications has he got for a position like that?"

"Qualifications?" George looked at her with surprise. "Why, he's all right. What's wrong with him? He knows

the business, everybody likes him, and he's a good manager. What more is wanted?"

"A lot more, I should say." Her speech became staccato, her words pointed. "Remember, it's London he's going to. It isn't Seattle or New Orleans or Pittsburgh."

"Well, I know; but he isn't going as Ambassador to the Court of St. James's either."

"He ought to have other social gifts," she persisted, "besides being able to mix a cocktail and tell a funny story. And how do you suppose Albertine Peters will get on in England? She'll antagonize everyone she meets. She thinks all European women are immoral."

George had to admit, with amusement, that there was a good deal of truth in this. Mrs. Peters spent her life fighting for the purity of American morals, and at the same time fiercely denying their impurity whenever the superiority of American to European morals was called into question. Trying to maintain this perilous and difficult position upon a logical tight-rope took her all her time, and Althea was probably right in thinking she wouldn't be popular.

"There's nobody else who could go."

"Isn't there?"

She looked satirically at him, as though she suspected his obtuseness of being assumed.

"Well, is there? Who would you suggest?"

Quietly, but with disdainful lips she said:

"I suggest your going yourself, of course, and taking Cleve and me." Then, crescendo, her voice rising: "Good heavens, George, I oughtn't to have to point this out to you. It's perfectly obvious that you're the one to go. And, what's even more obvious, it's high time you got out of this rut you're in."

He stared at her, amazed.

"Rut? What do you mean? I'm not in a rut."

He had suddenly released the swollen waters of a flood. He was inundated by the dammed-up river of her deep and

secret resentments. He was more than in a rut, he was buried alive. They were both of them buried alive. Their joint existence was just one little deadly round: the same faces, the same places, the same ideas—or lack of ideas. She wanted to go where she would hear other things discussed besides prohibition and business. They and all their stupid friends were as alike as peas. She wanted to go where people were different, different, different! She had always longed to live abroad, and he knew it perfectly well. She had always supposed they would have to wait until he retired from business, and by that time, heaven knew, she'd probably be a decrepit old woman.

Now a chance had come to go while they were young and pliable, and able to learn and to enjoy life, and he ignored it, he was too hopelessly buried in his rut to see it. She wanted Cleve to have a different education; she wanted him brought up to love learning and to appreciate beautiful things. She didn't want him brought up to be a good salesman. She was sick of New York, sick of their monotonous life, sick of everyone she knew. If something didn't happen soon she'd be sick of him.

It ended in wild tears and Althea sobbing in his arms. He was moved and shaken, but he was, above all, profoundly thankful that this thing she evidently wanted with all her heart and soul was something he could give her, and give her quickly, immediately, as though he were applying some necessary and healing remedy to a terrible wound. He therefore applied it, lovingly, thankfully, and her sobs gradually ceased, and he smoothed her hair with a humble and practised hand, wondering how he could best break the news to Howard Peters, and what reason he could find, other than the real one, for going in his place.

He put forward not a single objection himself. He had only one to offer, and that a purely selfish one. He didn't want to leave New York. He believed he was as happy there as it was reasonable to expect to be anywhere. It was his

home, and he had no wish to seek another. But such an objection as that, he thought, would have been as futile as a candle flame in a hurricane, and being purely personal and selfish as well as futile, it was not even mentioned.

George reflected as he neared the park that never, in all the time they had been married, over six years, had he seen Althea as eager and excited as now. What was it, he wondered—this curious attraction Europe had for women? He felt none of it himself. He supposed it was partly because women were better educated. Their minds responded more readily and painlessly to outside stimulus. They had time to go to lectures, to read instructive books, so that when they found themselves face to face with Canterbury Cathedral or the Arc de Triomphe or the Leaning Tower of Pisa they didn't stand naked and ashamed, but were able to clothe themselves in a few decent if flimsy rags of knowledge.

What drew them to Paris, of course, was chiefly the dressmakers. He was under no illusions about that. But they panted, too, for London, Rome, Florence, Berlin, Münich, Dresden, Vienna, Athens, and the lure there was something very different. No; he didn't feel the pull. He could imagine the discomforts of travelling, but not its joys. Hurrying for trains, counting small pieces of luggage, interviewing interpreters, putting up with the probable inconveniences of foreign hotels, being either too hot or too cold—what, he wondered, did they see in it? And it puzzled him very much to understand what Althea expected to find in London that she was not finding in New York. It wasn't the galleries, he was sure of that. The Metropolitan was as good as any, experts said so, and she never went there.

They would be total strangers in London, while in New York they had a large number of friends, and although these friends didn't altogether satisfy Althea, not a day passed without her seeing some of them. She had a convenient and comfortable home, chosen and furnished by herself; there was his mother's place on Long Island to go

to in the summer, with golf, bathing, riding, tennis and dancing, to say nothing of bridge and poker parties, all of which Althea occasionally enjoyed, and yet she wanted to leave all these tried and accustomed things for the doubtful benefits of life in a foreign country.

He stood for some moments on the kerb waiting for a break in the stream of cars flowing toward Broadway, whose angry glow already illuminated the sky behind him, then darted across to the other side with that feeling of shamed inferiority being on foot in New York always gave him. He seldom walked for pleasure; it was sentiment that had sent him out strolling to-night under the pretext of seeing if there were any letters for him at the club. New York didn't encourage the strolling habit, and it showed how moved and stirred he was. As he looked up at the square outline of his club against the sky, he wondered when he would see it again, and although he cared very little for it, finding it merely a convenience, the thought that he was now about to put a space of years between himself and it increased his heartache.

He met a friend at the door, and they stopped to speak. George had already said good-bye to him down-town, earlier in the day, and now it seemed to him as though they were separated by miles of ocean. He found nothing to say at such a distance, and they merely repeated their good-byes foolishly and flatly.

"Say good-bye to Althea for me," his friend said over his shoulder. "I suppose she's just about crazy at the idea of living in Europe. My wife would be."

George said yes, he thought she was, with the mental comment that crazy was hardly too strong a word for Althea's present mood of high elation, and they parted, and not wishing for further encounters, he sent a page in to get his letters, while he stood smoking on the steps. His friend's words, "My wife would be," echoed in his ears. All wives would be, he supposed. No, women had no roots. The page

returned with three bills, and he said good night and turned toward home.

The soft evening air was full of smoke and fumes from the cars that streamed past, a few inches only between hub and hub or nose and tail-light. Many of them were lighted inside, and women thus displayed themselves with wraps thrown open to show their pearls and the orchids on their shoulders. Their escorts were often thick, gross men who smoked large cigars and looked bulky and cumbersome sitting beside the women. These, George said to himself, his perceptions on this last night quickened and sharpened, were people of a different race from his own. They were the Schades and the Groszeks and the Kottmans and the Pildowskis and the Lilianthals and their womenfolk, and he thought, with an apprehension he had never felt before, of his own kind, the Mertons and the Mannerings and the Rushworths and the Stevens, and he wondered how long they would be able to keep their place in the great procession that once they led, with these quicker and more single-minded cohorts swelling and multiplying and pressing on faster and faster through the ranks of citizens. New York was now the most cosmopolitan city in the world. His own little circle was constantly being broken into by the incursion of some Groszek or Kottman who had a "perfectly lovely yacht" or a "perfectly heavenly camp" in the Adirondacks, and this was a source of increasing annoyance to Althea.

There was, as Althea well knew, and as he therefore knew, one circle in New York in which no exceptions were made except for the very best of reasons; a circle into which members had to be born, or else find their way through the power of some talent, or the ability to discover, finance or exploit talent. Music was at the moment the great open sesame, and if, when there, the musicians were often treated like queens' dwarfs or kings' jesters, in this it resembled every other such circle in every other big city. He knew, for she had often told him, that Althea was dissatisfied with

their own "set," which made exceptions alarmingly, and that she looked hungrily toward that other set which let its barriers down only for entertainment or novelty, never for material advantage.

He thought of Althea sorting out those letters of introduction as she lay on the sofa. She meant to make no mistakes. She considered that it would be better to destroy the lot than to start badly. Towards these preoccupations George was very tolerant. They seemed to him feminine and legitimate as long as they exacted no more from him than the money to pursue them.

He was accustomed to living in a world where "society," in its most limited and trivial sense, was almost wholly the women's affair. Men were sometimes drawn reluctantly into it, but for the most part it was the business of idle women during their otherwise idle days. These activities began in the morning as often as not, with the smart morning concerts, subscription affairs, that Althea usually managed to attend. Then there were elaborate and almost daily luncheons at which no man was ever seen, and to follow, receptions, teas, charity matinées, fashionable lectures. For all these functions the women dressed with that especial care they take when they are to be seen by large numbers of their own sex, and they endeavoured to be amused or amusing, or to attract the notice of women more socially prominent than themselves.

George often wondered what sort of a "kick" the women got out of this, but he supposed it was a kind of game to them, just as making money was a kind of game to him. Anyhow, it was the way all the women Althea knew spent their time, and it wasn't up to their husbands to criticize or complain, even if the dress bills grew higher. Why should they? Business was good.

He was satisfied that he had done right in giving in to Althea, and he was gratified that she was excited and eager at the thought of their new life, even though it was an

eagerness he couldn't share. It was a great thing, he considered, to know what you want, and Althea knew exactly. She was also very definite about what she didn't want. His own vague dissatisfactions and discontents he was in the habit of keeping to himself. He hardly knew what they were, he was only half aware of their existence, as one is sometimes half aware of pain while sleeping. He had from time to time a grumbling worry at the back of his mind, due to a suspicion that he was rather less than half educated, and that he ought to do something about it, but he was too busy to give the matter much attention, and he consoled himself with the thought that in matters of culture Althea had knowledge enough for two.

The elevator shot him up to the fifth floor, and he opened a heavy glass and wrought-iron door with his key. It was a door that opened smoothly and silently, like the ingenious and perfectly fitting door of a trap, and when it shut again with no more than a faint click it seemed to shut out the world for ever.

He laid his hat on the hall table and went into the drawing-room. Althea was still lying on the sofa, but she had fallen asleep. She lay with her knees drawn up, showing silken shins and small gold slippers, and the curves of her body under her green tea-gown looked young and supple and strong. She had a clear, evenly coloured skin, not white but a delicate brown, and her hair was nearly black, with bronze high-lights. She was a very pretty woman, and she knew it, none better. George stood looking down on her with pride and love and unfaded interest. She was all women to him, yet different from any. She was like all her sex and like none. He suddenly felt, as he stood there, as though she were going away from him, alone, and he experienced a sharp sensation of discomfort and loss, and had to remind himself that he was going with her, and that nothing was going to separate them or change them in any way. He bent down and kissed her forehead, and she woke and put her

arms around his neck as naturally and affectionately as a child. He loved her waking moments, before her shrewd brain had begun to work, for then she was like a warm and affectionate young animal, with pretty, drowsy ways.

"George, was I asleep? I suppose I must have been. I was dog tired." She stretched herself and yawned. "I can hardly believe it's to-morrow we go. To-morrow . . . only nine hours from now. Think of it!"

"It's to-morrow all right," he said, straightening himself, still with that feeling of depression and loss upon him.

She rubbed her eyes and got to her feet. He watched her tidying the cushions where she had been lying, and smoothing away her impress on the sofa.

"Well, thank heaven everything's ready. We'll only have to walk out of the house. I don't believe I've forgotten a thing."

She picked up the letters that lay in a little pile on the table.

"Do you think you'll use any of those things?" George asked, and wondered how long it would be before he would again see the lamplight on those familiar walls.

"Perhaps. We'll see. I've only kept five. Did you see anybody at the club?"

"Only Bruce. I'd said good-bye to him already."

Her bright observant eyes searched the room, and finding everything in order, she went toward the door. Tired though she was, she walked with her customary erectness. She carried herself with light step, raised breast and straight back. George lingered, full of unhappiness and vague regrets and apprehensions.

"Althea . . . I wonder when we'll live here again?"

"Oh, George, don't let's worry about that now. I'm so glad to be getting out of it I don't care when I see it again—or if I never do."

"Well, I care," he said. He looked at the rugs, the hangings, the furniture, at the tall lamp he had given her for Christmas. "We've lived here ever since we were married."

"Exactly," she replied, dryly, and stood waiting for him with her hand on the switch. "Come along, George. I'd no idea you were so sentimental. It's getting late, too."

"All right," he said, and moved slowly toward the door. "Turn out the light. I'm coming."

II

THEY SAILED on the *Olympic* in May. George found that a good many of the Pildowskis and the Kottmans and the Schades were sailing with them and occupying the best cabins, and he reflected that only a generation ago they, or their parents, had come to America in the steerage from that Mother Europe to which they were now—with such different thoughts and feelings—returning for a costly holiday. He thought none the less of them for that. On the contrary, he passionately admired success, like most of his kind, but he wondered how and where it was all going to end. The sport was good, but the pace was killing.

The *Olympic* also carried some of their own friends: Mr. and Mrs. Mills, who had a married daughter in Paris; the Devereux family, with three daughters to be presented at Court; and old Mr. and Mrs. Stevens, on their twenty-fifth trip abroad. And—seeming to occupy, in Althea's eyes, more space than any of them—Sherman Halsey, the rich New York broker and collector, who had a foot in New York, a foot in Paris and both hands in London.

Althea had never met him. He was a conspicuous ornament of that other "set" on which she cast envious eyes, but George had lunched with him once or twice, and now, at Althea's request, he took the opportunity of introducing her to the great man. She was suitably unmoved and unimpressed, and—for she had social gifts—appeared perfectly acquainted with his habits and interests, and spoke of them lightly and casually. She said, in the course of their first meeting, that it was too bad they were arriving in London in the midst of the season. London was so adorable when it wasn't full of Americans. George thought this was going rather far,

and demurred; but she said, laughing, and showing her excellent teeth:

"You wait, my dear; just you wait till you've seen a few thousands of your own countrypeople abroad. He's never been to Europe before, Mr. Halsey."

Sherman Halsey had a brown, wrinkled face, a brown wrinkled neck and small, slightly Oriental eyes. He looked, except for that hint of the East, like a multitude of other men who have had to make their own way in the world and have left the plough or the office broom to do it. This inconspicuousness served him well, for it made him seem enigmatic and dangerous, like a man in a mask. He was frequently silent and always watchful, and he intentionally allowed his occupations and interests to seem frivolous, as indeed they often were. He was a kindly snob with a double passion for society and finance, and though he was constantly in the company of women, he did not, as far as the observer could judge, prefer Mrs. Willie Edgecombe to the Comtesse de Mieux, or the Honourable Mrs. Hugh Leincester to the lovely Miss Partington. He gave careful parties in three capitals, and was rather more than welcome at the parties of his friends. It was said that the President of the United States made, from time to time, unofficial use of him, and it was generally understood that he could predict, if he would, the rise and fall of foreign currencies, and especially of the French franc.

He was quietly interested in and amused by the Goodalls. He told an acquaintance on board that if an inhabitant of Mars had come to him and asked to be shown a typical modern American couple, he would have led him straight to the Goodalls. He wondered, he said, what their progress would be like. He was always interested in what happened to Americans in England. Living in a foreign country was like a gentle and continuous massage, and was apt to change people's outlines a little. The Goodalls, he thought, would join an American circle, and Goodall would play a good

deal of golf. They would frequently be seen—but always together—at the better night clubs, and he would be seen from time to time in other company at the less reputable ones. Their accents would gradually and almost without their knowledge become modified. Otherwise they would remain unchanged. This, Mr. Halsey considered, was the normal course their lives would take unless diverted by something unforeseen. Mrs. Goodall might go far with help; but Goodall was conservative and socially unambitious, and would keep her back.

"I think he means to see something of us in London," Althea remarked on the fourth day; and George, who had been slightly irritated by the great man's almost embarrassing success with Cleve, answered that he couldn't see that it was anything to make a song and dance about. She looked at him with affectionate contempt.

"He's a very influential man. You seem to forget that."

Except for the fact that Cleve preferred being with Mr. Halsey to being with himself, George had nothing against him, and was pleased that they had encountered him, as it had pleased Althea. He was not fond, however, of spending long hours, that were only interrupted by meals, in talking to people in whom he had merely a slight interest, so he walked about the decks by himself a good deal, or hand in hand with Cleve, whenever that friendly child could be pried loose from some new and fascinating acquaintance.

Now that they were actually on their way to England he was finding it easier to adapt himself to the idea of change. The boat, an English boat, gave him confidence in the future. It was certainly agreeable to order a whisky and soda without feeling like a naughty child. He went into the library to look for books that would tell him something about England, and read part of Green's history of that country, two novels by H. G. Wells, and Kiplings' "Rewards and Fairies." The history he carried about with him during the six days of the

voyage, but he never got any further with it, to his own disgust, than Richard the Second. His mind seemed to shy away from new facts like a horse refusing a five-barred gate. Well, he wasn't going to pretend to be anything but what he was, just an average American citizen, and as such he had a deeply rooted belief that the world that moved dimly and somewhat inefficiently about the rim of the American Continent was of only secondary interest and importance anyway. This belief, acquired in early childhood, lay, and had always lain, undisturbed at the bottom of his mind. He was full of lazy goodwill and certain prejudices that did him credit chiefly because they were instinctive and not the result of mental effort. Had he arrived at them by way of thought they would have reflected unfavourably on his reasoning powers, for there was little or no reason in them.

While Althea talked to Sherman Halsey about a variety of things, George chatted with the purser or the ship's doctor, or watched the wide forked wake of their passage through the untroubled Atlantic, or sat and listened with a half-awake attention to the other two. It always gave him pleasure to watch Althea. She wore on most days a neat black coat and skirt, or a grey flannel one with a fine blouse underneath the coat and some neat little hat pulled well over her eyes. She stood out even among other neat and well-groomed women. Her features were piquant and decided, her dark eyes far apart and her cheek-bones high. Her nose was straight, with adventurous nostrils, and while her upper lip was too long for beauty, it gave her face a look of decision and firmness, and closed down firmly over the lower one. When she rouged her mouth her face looked hard, and George saw this, and tried to discourage the use of rouge, but without success. It was difficult to imagine that Althea had ever been a child, least of all an untidy, greedy child. Some women carry their past youth about with them, so that, watching them, one catches glimpses of their childhood, but

Althea looked as though she must have been born at twenty-five or six.

Sherman Halsey knew that she didn't know the right people in New York and no one at all in London, because she had told him so, with what he saw to be calculated frankness. He thought none the worse of her for it, it was a misfortune that might happen to anybody. He was a kindly worldling, and it gave him pleasure to help a pretty woman. He decided that he would introduce her to one or two people who might be useful to her, for there would be no harm in it, and it might make a great difference to her prospects. He was never afraid of burdening himself with not-worth-while acquaintances, for he knew quite well how to get rid of them if necessary, and he was never in one place long enough to be bored. Also he had confidence in Althea. She would know better than to make more demands on his time or on himself than it would be his wish and pleasure to accord.

As they approached Southampton, Althea's excitement communicated itself to George, while Cleve, who had made fifty friends, burst into noisy tears when he realized they were soon to leave the ship. George took him away, for the boy was getting on Althea's nerves, and they stood apart and watched the sailors. Althea had never had six uninterrupted days of Cleve before, and she hoped she never would again until he attained an age of reasonableness.

Sherman Halsey had been extremely kind to the little family. He had told Althea where to go for a house and a nurse, had recommended a tailor to George, and had offered to put him up at the American Club, one of the five London clubs of which he was a member. As they neared the harbour he stood talking to Althea by the rail. Low, blue-black clouds presently covered them and let down a thin, fine shower which blotted out the land and then passed over, leaving an innocent sky, as blue and tender as a flower. He lifted his brown, expressionless face and sniffed the air.

"English rain," he said; and something in his voice made Althea glance quickly at him, for it was the first time she had observed in him any sign of sentiment or emotion.

"You must love England a lot," she told him, "to include even the rain in your affection."

"Yes," he replied; "yes, I do love England." He added, with Oriental solemnity, "America is my father, France my wife, but England is my mother."

This somewhat sententious utterance jarred on Althea. It had the sound of having been often said by him before, and she felt like remarking that he evidently liked his relations better than most people did. She only smiled appreciatively, however, for he was, as she had told George, a very influential man, but he went down a few points in her estimation. Successful Americans, she reflected, were very often unbearably sentimental about their mothers. She had frequently noticed it. She thought it was a form of conceit, as though, looking back and surveying their own triumphs, they had come to the conclusion that their mothers must have been very remarkable women indeed to have produced men of such calibre.

She crossed the gang-plank later with a hope that they had forgotten nothing, and a fervent wish that Cleve would walk properly, and not drag upon her hand in his eagerness to look back at the monster that had just disgorged them, and which now lay in the dock forgetful of them, showing only its steep, awful and unfamiliar sides. But George was sharply aware of placing his feet for the first time on English earth, and the thought moved him and stirred his emotions. He was in that little old island from which his ancestors had sprung, the land of the pound sterling, for which he had a considerable respect, and the consciousness of these things made that landing significant and memorable. His thoughts were soon scattered by the business of finding their places in the train, and when they had settled themselves and their belongings, he opened

The Times which he had bought on the platform, and Althea looked out of the window and Cleve slept.

He thought *The Times* was probably as typical of England as anything could be. There was nothing to catch the eye on the front pages, and when one found that for which one searched, one found calm impartiality and statements of a wholly unprovocative nature set forth as unstrikingly as possible. Murders, wars, Parliaments, weddings—they were all presented in the same dignified and restrained manner. It was a paper that seemed to say, "There is never anything really new or worth getting excited about, whatever the other dailies say. The play goes on, the scenes are shifted from time to time, but the actors and the plot remain very much the same." He thought it decidedly unstimulating and dull, but perhaps people in England didn't expect to be stimulated for twopence, only informed.

Presently Althea called his attention to the countryside through which they were passing, and he put down his paper, and was charmed by the fields and woods and villages of Hampshire. Late primroses, like dappled sunlight, ornamented the banks along the line, and now and again, in woods of lettuce green, they saw a wash of blue, which Althea told him was the blue of wild hyacinths. It was a day of small showers and moving clouds and sudden bursts of sunlight, and George saw the country at its prettiest and gentlest. He thought the towns dreadful, with their rows of yellow-brick houses; but he liked the farms and villages, and the churches that raised square Norman towers above the trees. He said they were very artistic. Althea winced at this, with a face of pain.

"Not that word, George, I beseech you! If you must call them something, call them picturesque, though that's bad enough."

"Why, what's wrong with artistic?" he mildly inquired.

"It's a word that went out when Turkish cosy corners went out, and gilded bulrushes, and hair receivers."

He was accustomed to being corrected by Althea in this way, and took no exception to it. He knew that she was better informed than he, quicker to take things up and drop them again when they were out of date, more *au courant*, as she would have put it, with what people were doing and thinking. And for a wife to put her husband right in such matters seemed to him natural and proper.

The world of abstract ideas, of literature, of art, the world of all the graces, was, in his opinion, the world of women and of womanish men. He was quite willing to be told, and to remember if he could, what she said, but he was satisfied that such knowledge as he had of these things should filter down to him through her.

Cleve presently awoke, refreshed, and began asking questions. An elderly Englishwoman who, with her husband, occupied the opposite seats in the Pullman, watched him with smiling interest and indulgence, and presently answered one of his inquiries. The child, delighted at making a new acquaintance, got down from his seat at her invitation and stood beside her, leaning against her knee. He continued to ask questions which it evidently amused her to answer, and she smiled reassuringly to Althea, who was afraid the boy was becoming a bore.

"American children are so friendly," she said, raising her voice a little. "They're not in the least shy, like our children."

Although she realized this was intended as a compliment, Althea took it quite otherwise, and felt embarrassed. She made up her mind that she would have a good English nurse for him before she'd been in the country a week. She raised her eyes to the suitcases on the rack over their heads, and saw on one of them the name Lord Beauvais, with an address in Shropshire. The passenger list had told her that a Lord and Lady Beauvais were on board the *Olympic*, but she hadn't set eyes on them until this moment. One never did see people of their sort, she reflected, until too late. She was more than ever afraid that Cleve was becoming tiresome, and summoned

him back to her side with thanks and apologies. She and the elderly couple talked a little in a wholly impersonal fashion, and when the train entered the station Lady Beauvais wished them a pleasant stay in England.

"We're likely to be here a long time," said George, who had not yet spoken to them. "A year or two, anyhow." And she replied:

"Ah, indeed? How delightful! Good-bye. Good-bye, little man," and Lord Beauvais bowed and smiled.

"If we'd met on the ship and talked every day, I don't suppose she'd have said more than that," Althea thought, by way of consoling herself for what seemed a lost opportunity. They were, when one noticed them at all, a handsome, dignified couple. She wondered if they had a very wonderful place, and if they were really important people or merely titled. It made her a little hot to think of the way Cleve had leaned against her and clutched her knee with his undiscriminating little hands.

George, who had caught her whisper, "They're Lord and Lady Beauvais," also wondered about them, and it amused him to take mental note of the fact that they were the first titled people, with the exception of a Canadian baronet, to whom he had ever spoken. He wondered if they had always seemed as much the two halves of a whole as they did now, or how many storms they had weathered in the past, and how many infidelities she had had to forgive him. Old couples such as this one always confirmed his already strong, if unthinking, belief in the indestructibility of marriage.

He didn't think much of the station, for he was used to the spotless grandeur of the Grand Central and the Pennsylvania Terminus, but Althea said that most European stations were ugly and that he would soon get used to it. While their trunks were being piled on the hotel omnibus, Sherman Halsey came up to say good-bye. His valet was attending to his luggage, so he was at leisure to talk to them. He had

a flat in St. James's Street, where everything would be in readiness for him. The actual business of travelling meant little to Sherman Halsey, and he anticipated nothing worse from it than the rare and unlikely ordeal of an uncomfortable bed. He left the station first, after saying that he would see them again in a few days, and as he went, Althea observed:

"He's a nice little creature. I believe I might get quite fond of him." She never displayed, even to George, any feelings of triumph she might have, and it pleased her to diminish, in a few words, those who, socially, towered above her.

Presently they too left the station, and George found himself in a city that seemed to him, because it was totally strange, quite formless and characterless. He let himself be borne along without trying to gather any impressions, and watched Althea, who, alert and excited, her memory stimulated by objects that she recognized, kept turning her head this way and that, and crying out:

"Look, George, that's Trafalgar Square, and the Nelson Monument. Look, Cleve, see that man right up on the top. Now we're in Cockspur Street. In a minute we'll be in Piccadilly, where all the clubs are. And that's Green Park over there. Isn't it green and lovely? I'd no idea I'd remember so much. Piccadilly! Just think of seeing darling Piccadilly again. And the dear old red omnibuses. . . . Goodness me! I don't believe they've changed a thing. Oh, yes, they have, they've torn down that nice old house that used to be there; I've forgotten its name. What a shame!"

They were held up at Berkeley Street.

"Hello!" exclaimed George, "there's a London policeman. That's the first one I've seen."

"My dear George, we've passed dozens, I should think."

"Well, it's the first one I've noticed. They call them Bobbies, Cleve."

"Why do they call them Bobbies, papa? Why do they?"

"Now he's going to let us go on. Look, he's got white

things on his sleeves so it's easier to see when he holds up his hand."

"But *why* do they call them Bobbies, papa? Why do they?"

"Oh, just for fun, I guess. Don't the automobiles look queer and different? Look, there goes a Rolls."

Althea said, her eyes very bright:

"Why couldn't we buy a Rolls while we're over here, George? We could sell it again when we go back home. I've always longed for a Rolls."

"We'll see," answered George.

When they reached the hotel he looked up at its modest front with disfavour.

"It doesn't look like much. I think we ought to have gone to the Ritz, or that other place, Claridge's."

"It's all right," Althea assured him. "You can't judge anything by the outside in this country. Your mother and I stayed here for nearly a month. Besides, I didn't want to take Cleve to one of those big places."

"All right. You know best. Out we get then."

Sherman Halsey's eyes would have taken pleasure in the sight of the little family at the hotel desk. Althea alert, watchful, impatient of any delay; George quiet, good-humoured, inclined to be deliberate in his movements and speech; and Cleve, his big head revolving wonderingly on his little shoulders while he tugged at Althea's hand and kicked with his little square-toed shoes—until Althea stopped him—at the wood of the desk.

"Mama, is this a 'utel? Oh, Mama, I'm so tired! Can't I have a n'ice cream soda? Mama, can't I? I'm so thirsty. Please, can't I?"

"Cleve, don't whine like that. We're going upstairs in just a minute, as soon as your father finishes talking. And then you'll have your supper in bed. Now be a good boy."

"He's tired, poor little kid," said George, turning toward them. "Come on. He says we're on the third floor, but I

guess that means the fourth. Come on, Cleve. We're going up in the elevator now, see?"

"They're called lifts in England," said Althea. "A much better, shorter word, too."

The lift man smiled at them in a friendly way. He had so often heard these comments before.

III

To HAVE said, by the end of June, that Althea knew her way about London would have been to state only half the truth. She knew London better than many Londoners. She knew the different social values of the various "good" districts, values hardly discernible to the ordinary observer. George discovered this when they were looking for a house. He imagined, vaguely, that everybody who could afford it wanted to live in or near Park Lane, but Althea soon put him right about this, and he learned that there were other neighbourhoods equally desirable and less obvious.

"I suppose you mean those squares, Portman Square and Grosvenor Square and Cavendish Square?"

"Well, they're good addresses, of course, but I think they're a little bit obvious too."

"What about Mayfair? What about Berkeley Square? Isn't all that part supposed to be pretty good?"

"Oh, yes; but I don't know. I think some of these young writers have popularized Mayfair till it's almost vulgar. I rather like the North side of the park. A lot of the quieter sort of smart people are going there, I believe. And there are lots of nice houses."

"Isn't Kensington a good place?"

"It certainly is not. It's too sort of suburban and what they call stuffy here, which means terribly respectable. It's the sort of place retired colonels go to die. Knightsbridge I like. I think I'd as soon live there as anywhere. It's near good shops, and it's close to the park for Cleve, and the agent says he can give me the addresses of some really good houses there. I thought when I was here before that I'd like to live in Knightsbridge."

In Althea's opinion Knightsbridge was not only "good" but non-committal. One could live in Knightsbridge, she believed, and be either smart or intelligent or both, according to the circle in which one eventually found oneself. But she didn't bother to explain all this to George.

"Well," he said, "you know best. I'm game to live anywhere provided I can get to the office inside of forty-five minutes."

She found a fairly large, airy and sparsely but well-furnished house in Wilton Crescent. So sparsely furnished was it that she saw she would have the pleasure of buying certain things—period pieces—that she could either sell at the end of their stay or take back to America. The rent was a little less than half what they themselves asked and got for the apartment in New York.

George liked the house very well. He liked its uncrowded rooms, its high ceilings, its almost up-to-date central heating, its good open fireplaces, and its breakfast-room overlooking a garden which, when they first saw it, was full of irises. It was flagged with broken paving-stones, and although it was narrow, a central pool containing a lead fountain gave it a spurious air of size. Beside the high brick walls surrounding this garden were beds of herbaceous plants which showed as yet only their leaves: companulas, phlox, lupins and delphinium. George, who had left Althea on the second floor, walked about here smoking. He thought it a decided advantage to have a garden in London, even though it was somewhat overlooked, and he wondered what Cleve would say when he discovered the presence of gold-fish in the pool. It struck him that they would be able to keep a small dog. The boy had never had a dog of his own, and he would be able to take it with him into the park, where he was at that moment with a pleasant but somewhat elderly nurse. He needed, George considered, something or someone to play with, to make him run about.

He heard Althea calling, and turned to see her beckoning

to him from the doorway. She had a pencil and paper in her hand, and on her face a look of resolution. There had been two days of almost oppressive heat, and she wore a big black hat and a thin chiffon dress such as women wear in London the moment the weather gives them an excuse to do so.

It was the third time Althea had been over the house, and there were no fresh discoveries to be made. She was now making a note of the things she wished to speak to the agent about.

He followed her into the drawing-room. The rugs were rolled up and pushed against the wall, and the bare parquet floor shone like a lake. The furniture, grouped in the centre of the room, was covered with white dust-sheets, and the chandeliers were shrouded in muslin bags, but she had already examined each piece of furniture and could have made a rough guess at the number of lustres in each chandelier.

"I think we had better decide now," she said. "Here are the drawbacks. There are only three bathrooms, two for us and one for the servants, but I suppose we can manage. The gas stove in the kitchen is tiny, only four burners, but I suppose we can have a bigger one put in. I won't use the coal range. The food has to be carried up to the nursery, because the dumb waiter only goes as far as the dining-room, but English servants must be used to that sort of thing." It occurred to her to wonder whether they were called dumb waiters in England or food-lifts, and she made up her mind to find out at once. "Otherwise it's a very good house. Even the basement is quite decent. And all the bedrooms are nice. In most of the houses I've seen here there's been one good bedroom and all the rest have been like pigstys. There's a day and a night nursery for Cleve, too. I don't believe we could do better than this if we looked for a year."

"Well," said George, "it's all right as far as I'm concerned. It's you and Cleve that matter. I like the garden. Cleve can keep a dog here, Althea."

"Yes; I suppose he could." She went on: "It isn't a high rent, even for London. I do like these green walls, picked out in gold. I'm sick to death of white walls. Let's go to the agent now and fix everything up. I'm wild to get out of the hotel and get settled."

"All right, that suits me. When we're through with the agents we might go and have lunch somewhere. What do you say?"

She said she couldn't. She was going out to lunch with Sherman Halsey's friend, Mrs. Monash. She had told him yesterday, but he had evidently forgotten.

George was disappointed. He seldom left the City—he was ceasing, at Althea's request, to call it down-town—in the middle of the day, and now that he had he wanted to lunch with her. He was wearing a new grey suit made by the tailor Sherman Halsey had recommended, and he was pleased with it, and more in the mood, this warm June day, for dalliance than business. However, he returned to the City after the house question was settled, and Althea went off in a taxi to keep her engagement.

He had accustomed himself to London life with greater ease and quickness than he had believed possible. At the same time he frankly missed New York, unlike Althea, who seemed now to look upon their life there as a sort of purgatory. He missed his friends; he missed the people who, though they were not quite his friends, impinged upon his daily life and helped to make it the very tolerable business it was for him: the typists and other members of the office staff, particularly the head office boy, with whom he was in the habit of exchanging items of baseball news; his Italian boot-black; the cripple from whom he bought his papers; the head waiter of the Ambassadors' Restaurant; a certain gentleman approached by a side door and a pass-word who supplied him with drinks; his chauffeur, Olson, an impudent, indifferent but skilful Swede, to whom he paid the sort of salary described as princely. He missed their apartment and

the elaborate fittings of his bathroom, where he was provided with every conceivable kind of bath, shower, douche, spray or wave yet invented by whoever does invent the complicated luxuries that play such a part in American life.

It surprised him to find that although men came to their offices in the City later and left them earlier, they nevertheless got through as much in a day as did the average business man in New York. The work seemed to him more concentrated, there was less sociability, less "treating," less badinage; interviews were briefer and more direct, with fewer unnecessary words. He found much politeness and an almost embarrassing admiration of American methods and American efficiency.

He found, and had fully expected to find, a natural but gradually weakening prejudice against articles of American manufacture. The goods were there, on the market, and were bought in ever-increasing quantities, not because they were necessarily better, but because they were more practical and cheaper. English manufacturers were still making goods, he discovered, with the idea that they must last. American manufacturers kept a shrewd and watchful eye on the rapid changes and development in every branch of business and industry. "You want this to-day. but you will want something different to-morrow, and we will have it," they seemed to say. They not only satisfied present needs, they stimulated fresh ones.

George's office furniture and fittings were manufactured on this plan. They were the last word in ingenious practicability. He was naïve about his office furniture. He believed in it, admired it, loved it. He had believed in it when, on leaving the University, a rich aunt had died and left him twenty-five thousand dollars. He had promptly and courageously invested it in this small but growing business, and had become first a director, then chairman, and his was now the controlling interest. The Goodall filing system, the Goodall revolving chairs, the Goodall desks and book-

cases—he would have gone to the stake declaring these things to be the best of their kind in the world.

He was glad now that Althea had made him come to England. He saw that the job was bigger than he or any of the directors had imagined, and while Howard Peters was a good routine man, he lacked initiative. Moreover there was a certain crudeness and rawness about him that might have antagonized men who were neither amused nor impressed by the jocular "Oh, Boy!" type of citizen.

Althea, he reflected, as he ate his lonely lunch at the "Star and Vulture," was surprisingly often right. She knew precisely the right moment for doing the right thing. She had a positive genius for not making blunders. She had been quite right about Cleve. He had needed discipline, and needed it badly. He was already quieter, sweeter, more amenable to suggestion. He was not yet fond of his nurse, but he was beginning to show a desire to propitiate and please her. His parents were the only people in authority he showed affection for, but he now recognized her inevitability and the startling fact that his parents were on her side. There was one thing he definitely liked, and that was being taken out on the rainiest days dressed in his little waterproof coat and hat, and the waterproof trousers that fastened under his rubber-covered shoes. This seemed to him adventurous and exciting.

But although George had adapted himself readily to his new surroundings, he nevertheless looked upon his stay in England as a term of agreeable imprisonment. He looked forward to returning to New York within two years, and allowing his place to be taken by someone else. By that time the European end of the business ought to be running smoothly. He bought and read the *Saturday Evening Post* each week with unfailing regularity, and each week he nearly disappeared under an untidy pile of American illustrated Sunday papers, for he wished to keep as closely in touch with America as possible. It was sometimes more than Althea

could do to refrain from acid comment when he spent more than one evening employed in this way.

She, on the contrary, read the English papers and magazines. She read *The Times*, the *Spectator*, the *New Statesman*, the *Tatler*, the *Bystander* and the *Sketch*. She joined the Times Book Club, and brought home such works as *The Letters of Queen Victoria*, and *The Farringdon Diary*, and George wondered a little at the speed with which she got through them. She also read the more "important" novels, studying the reviews with some care, but she confined herself, George noticed, to English works of fiction, excepting only the works of Sinclair Lewis.

It seemed to George, at about this time, that he and Althea were finding more things to differ about than they had found before. There was the matter of the pie, for instance. They had not long been settled in Wilton Crescent before a thing called a deep-dish tart began to appear on the table. It was very nice, George had no fault to find with it, for he was not at all a fussy man, and in all probability nothing would have been said but for the fact that Althea one day remarked that the English deep-dish tart was in every way superior to the American pie. George challenged this, almost with indignation.

"There's no comparison," he said, "in my opinion. There's too much juice in this and not enough crust. There's only that thin piece on the top, that you may or may not get your proper share of. Why, down in the City when I ask for apple pie they give me some stewed apple with a little triangular piece of cold piecrust laid alongside, and I'll bet the two never met until they were handed to me on a plate. I don't call that a pie."

"I don't know anything about that," said Althea. "I've never seen that kind; but I do think that a tart like this, the way Mrs. Thompson makes it, is far more digestible. You don't get that horrible, soggy under-crust that's so unwholesome."

"Well, I don't think you can beat the American pie," George replied; "and I don't know about unwholesome. I guess I've eaten my share of them, and I've darned little cause to complain about my health."

"Your health may be all right, but you know perfectly well that Americans are the most dyspeptic race of people in the world. And I believe it's the hot breads, the ice water and those unwholesome pies."

George didn't continue the argument. He didn't like arguing, he believed in stating his opinion and then leaving it at that, but he felt that what Althea had said was almost treasonable, and it hurt him. It had always seemed to him that the American pie was the last word in pie evolution. If you attacked the pie you attacked the constitution of the United States. He knew it was ridiculous to mind such trifles, but the fact was that he was a little disturbed by Althea's readiness to adopt English ways and customs. He had no objection to English customs, *qua* customs, but they seemed to him suited to English people, and as they were only going to live in England a year or so—he now thought about that time of durance as a year or so—it wasn't worth while learning new ways that would have to be unlearned again—if they didn't want to be laughed at—when they got back. He knew that Althea was taking great care not to commit Americanisms, such as telling people that she was pleased to meet them, or pleased to have met them, for these disarming phrases would, from time to time, slip out. She was also careful to speak of him as "My husband" to strangers, and as "George" to friends, never as "Mr. Goodall." She took him to task one day for introducing her to a casual City acquaintance.

"It isn't done here," she said. "An introduction ought to mean something. You ought to introduce people because you want them to meet, not because they happen to be standing within a few yards of each other. There's no point in it."

"Well, it seems to me rude not to, all the same," George insisted.

"All this casual introducing is a purely American habit," she said. "It's nervousness, partly. The English way isn't rude, it's far more thoughtful for others. And here an introduction has some meaning."

"I guess everything that's English seems right to you," said George a little sadly, and she replied:

"Well, George, you'll find that there's usually a pretty good reason for everything the English do or don't do."

The first of August found them still in London. Althea had met a good many people by that time, most of them, it is true, Americans living in London—they seemed to be legion—and the American wives of Englishmen, who also seemed to be legion. But Mrs. Monash, Sherman Halsey's friend, was an Englishwoman, and a tower of strength, and Althea had already met a number of her friends, and expected to meet more in the autumn. They had arrived in the midst of the season, when most people's plans were made, and their engagement books full, but Mrs. Monash had been as kind as possible, and had done as much for Althea as she could before going off to Goodwood, Cowes and then Scotland. Althea had un uneasy feeling that she ought to be doing the same things, but she would have to wait till next year, and even then it might be difficult, because of George.

She liked men to be busy, she thought every husband should leave the house about nine and come back about six. It was best for them and best for their wives, for it gave them time to attend to their own affairs—the care of the person, clothes, and the pursuit of those who pursued the arts. She would have preferred George to come home earlier on Fridays, however, to allow for more spacious week-ends, and to take at least a month off in the winter, to follow the sun, and another month or six weeks in the summer. These things he did reluctantly, and under pressure, and some-

times he wouldn't do them at all. Holidays troubled his conscience.

She was convinced that she had done the very best she could for herself in marrying George, and it was inconceivable that George could have got on without her. She had never met a man she liked half as well. He was far nicer, far better-looking than any husband she knew, and he was quite as successful. Moreover, his ardour was unabated: she was still, to him, "all a wonder and a wild desire," and while she appreciated this up to a point—for it flattered her self-esteem, as it would any woman's—she found it a little exacting. She had her own highly conventionalized ideas about married life. She had been full of suitable ardour herself for the first few months of their marriage, but she now considered a diminishing tempo right and proper. They were sensible people, they loved each other, they got on very well indeed; it was natural that they should now "take a good deal for granted," as some of her friends put it.

This coolness increased, if anything, George's love for her. If she were capricious, if she sometimes turned his love-making aside with the armour of her common sense, if she were unresponsive to the point of indifference, it was because she was the very best type of American woman, and American women were not, first and foremost, interested in love, like French or Italian or Austrian women. They were better balanced, more refined, more highly civilized. So George sincerely believed.

He did not realize that it is the cold and unstirred who are the romantics, and the ardent, impulsive ones who are the realists. Althea, though he had not yet discovered it, was a romantic. Whether he saw her in the actinic rays of early morning or across a candle-lit dinner-table, she was the same mysterious and fascinating being, and the natural scent of her hair was better than any perfume.

On the other hand, it was impossible for Althea to imagine the creature of her dreams—and she had her dreams—in the

act of shaving. A man whose braces were a familiar sight to her—only George insisted on calling them suspenders—was to be treated coolly and with nice common sense. If she had been a Frenchwoman she might have called him "*Mon ami,*" and acquired a lover, but she was an American, and dreams are dreams, and such a thought hardly entered her head though as a matter of fact she did sometimes call him "*Mon ami*" very prettily when they were alone at dinner.

George, after frequent urgings on Althea's part, decided that he would be able to leave London for the last two weeks of August and the first two weeks of September, and suggested that they go to Dinard or Le Touquet, but Althea preferred Biarritz, where a number of her friends were going; so to Biarritz they went, leaving a small grey dog to be taken care of by Mrs. Thompson. They spent two days in Paris, and Althea found that two days in Paris in the middle of August were quite enough, so they went on to their destination, and were absorbed into a great hotel facing the sea, where there were Americans, English, Spaniards, a few French and the Hon. Francis Mortlake.

IV

It was the first of October, and London was ceasing to be what snobbish people call empty. Its crowds had been for the past two months more cosmopolitan and drab. The city's pulse had slowed down to below normal. The grass in the parks was worn and tired-looking, the trees' green brilliance was dimmed, their leaves, from which the sap was reluctantly retiring, showed brown, curled edges. The papers, now that smart people had gone away, made less fuss about the weather, as though the sun only shone to please the fashionable, and the rain only rained to annoy them. But all that was changed now. The streets hummed with luggage-laden taxis, and the Goodalls had been home two weeks.

It had been a dull two weeks for the lively and pleasure-loving Althea, as not a soul she knew was in London. She filled in the grey interval, however, with buying additional furniture for the house and visiting the picture galleries, her failure to go earlier having troubled her conscience a little.

She had been very sorry to leave Biarritz. It had been gay, and was about to become even gayer. Mary Monash was planning to spend ten days more there, and Francis Mortlake was staying on till the end of September. Althea, having a business man for a husband, was obliged to return owing to Europe's need of up-to-date office furniture, and she resented it a little, but she didn't seriously consider letting George go back alone, although he suggested it himself. What would he do all by himself in London, in a house where the servants were little more than strangers to him, and he to them? And she thought it good policy to go while one or two people—Francis Mortlake in particular—

were imploring her to stay. Of such mixed motives is the reluctant execution of our duty often made up.

The duller, shorter days, the colder winds, were not unwelcome to her, for they gave her a brisk and agreeable feeling of being about to start her life afresh. George felt the same. He disliked the unsettling effect of summer, and the demands made upon his time. He had enjoyed the swimming at Biarritz, but what he really liked was golf, and he could play golf just as well in the winter. What he heard about the mildness of English winters—their mildness out of doors—encouraged him.

Althea had been shopping this October day, and she came home about four with a large bunch of flame-coloured dahlias in her arms. She was skilful at arranging flowers—one of those minor arts at which women often and without effort, excel—and she realized that the green and gold drawing-room, with the curtains of dull gold damask, needed little in the way of embellishment, so she arranged the dahlias formally in three glass bowls of similar size and shape, and placed one on a table behind the sofa, another on a small console table between two mirrors, and one in the window, where it caught the late afternoon light. As she put this one in its place, she saw, with an exquisite shock of pleasure, that Francis Mortlake's dignified and somewhat ancient Rolls had just stopped at the door. He disliked fast driving and fast cars, or cars that looked as though they belonged to rich young Guardsmen. His own looked as though it might have belonged to a retired Chief Justice. The sight of it brought back overwhelmingly his own personality, which, in these two weeks, had been eluding her, and the very tones of his voice, and she fled up the stairs to tidy herself and wash her hands, feeling as though she had already seen him and spoken to him. She had been looking forward to this moment ever since leaving Biarritz. The time of waiting had seemed interminable, and now that he had come it seemed hardly to have existed. She was not in love;

but Francis was exciting and stimulating and amusing, and it was so extraordinary and so fortunate that they had met. And now he was here, and thank heaven, she thought, Grieves and Cotter were wearing their new uniforms for the first time, prune-coloured dresses with caps and aprons of deep cream. For, like most women, she imagined that men observed these things, crediting them with noticing what they noticed themselves, and forgetting that their eyes were busy in quite other ways. She told Grieves, who came to announce him, that she was not at home this afternoon to anyone else. She passed a comb through her hair and then brushed it hard to make it lie close to her head and give it gloss, and she smoothed her dress about the hips with a reasonable satisfaction. Then she went downstairs and, pushing open the door which Grieves had left ajar, she crossed the room to meet her caller with that erect, proud carriage that was the first thing men noticed about her.

After a handshake and a word or two of greeting, they moved toward the fireplace, where a small fire burned in a high, eighteenth-century grate.

"It's nice of you to come and see me so soon, Francis," she said. "How are you?"

He laughed a little, as though he were amused at himself and at her.

"Me? I'm all right. What do you mean by 'nice of me'? What absurd things you women say, don't you? Of course I came soon. I got back last night after a foul crossing. There were about seven train loads of people on the boat."

"It was the same when we crossed. No, don't sit there, take that comfortable chair."

"What a nice house you've got! Whose is it?"

"Oh . . . I don't know." She was thinking that he was certainly no less attractive than he had seemed to her in Biarritz. "Some people called Trueman. I don't know anything about them. Tell me, Francis, did Mary come back with you?"

"No; she gets back on Friday. She stopped in Paris. How's George? And how's Cleve?"

"All right. George is terribly busy. Everybody in England seems to want a Goodall filing cabinet at the same moment."

"George won't mind that."

"No. Tell me, Francis. . . . What was it I wanted to ask you? Oh, yes, you didn't mind my not answering your letter, did you? It was nice of you to write and tell me the news."

He laughed again, looking at her with eyes of amused speculation.

"I didn't tell you any news."

"Well, that was a *façon de parler* if you like. You didn't mind, did you? I told you I probably wouldn't."

"Yes, of course I minded. I wanted to hear how you got home, what the Channel was like, how Cleve behaved, and all that sort of thing."

"You see, if I'd written to you at all, that's exactly the sort of letter I would have written, so I didn't write."

"Yes, but that's exactly the sort of letter I was expecting from you. What else?"

"Oh, well, but, Francis, I can do better than that . . . when I want to."

"My dear Althea, if I thought you couldn't, would I be here?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"I would not. A woman incapable of writing the other sort of letter wouldn't look, act, dress and talk as I expect any lady I take tea with to look, dress, act and talk."

"How ridiculous you are, Francis! Did you have an amusing time in Biarritz after I left?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Who's being ridiculous now?"

"But Mary was there, and no end of amusing people."

"You forget I've known dear Mary more than twenty years."

"Still, it's such a heavenly place. I believe I could be happy there all by myself."

He wasn't listening. She saw his eyes fix themselves on some object over her head.

"Althea, I believe that's a Renoir. It is a Renoir." He got up and went to look at the picture behind her, while she turned her head and watched him. "Whose is it? Is it yours?"

"No, alas, it isn't. It belongs to the house." Renoir . . . Renoir . . . was he one of the very moderns, or did he belong to those advanced and brilliant eighteen-eighties she was beginning to read about? She ought to have known it was a good picture, but she had thought it looked as though it had been painted by a clever child, and had nearly banished it, only she had liked its colours against the green wall.

Francis, after studying the picture for some minutes, turned towards her again.

"It's extraordinary, isn't it, that fellows like Renoir and Cezanne and Van Gogh and Degas were painting as they did while we were still worshipping Landseers and Leightons here? I wasn't, thank God. I was just about to be born. I missed the worst of that period."

"They were certainly ahead of their time," said Althea. She had placed Renoir and those others now, forever. "I've been going to the galleries a lot since I've been back. I went to the Tate yesterday."

Francis returned to his chair.

"You haven't been with me, so you'll have to go again. Does George like pictures?"

"He doesn't even see them. I've tried hard to interest him in painting, and art generally, but it isn't a bit of good. He just doesn't care a thing about it."

"Why should he? He's very nice as he is. I like George."

"I adore George," she said quickly; "but I do wish he

wasn't such a Philistine, bless his heart. He's just like most American men."

"Well, I wouldn't try to change him if I were you."

"But, Francis, he'd be so much more companionable if he cared a little for the things I like, art and music and literature. They simply don't exist for him."

"My dear Althea, if you try to change George now he'll begin looking for someone who doesn't know a Botticelli from a Bateman. Or, if by some miracle you did succeed in changing him, he'd probably run off with an artist's model from Chelsea. Leave George alone. He's all right as he is. After all, you can always come to me for culture."

Such remarks as this never failed to amuse and please Althea. They made her laugh, and provoked retorts, and although they were only meant to amuse and provoke, it seemed to her that under their provocative boldness lay a germ of real feeling.

"I probably will," she returned. "That's precisely where the danger lies." Then she hastened to ask: "But, Francis, why is it that it never seems to matter much about a woman's education, and it matters so terribly about a man's? George went to a University, but he managed to get through because he was a good football player and a good rower. He never worked; he never really studied. Still, he had a much better education than I had. What I've learnt about literature and art I've taught myself since I've been grown up. Why do men so rarely make the effort?"

"It's because women are so infernally anxious to please everybody," said Francis, who never flattered. "There happen to be a great many men practising the arts, and as women like to have artists about them, they have to take a little trouble. A man, on the other hand, expects to be liked because he's kind to animals and can wear plus fours without looking a fool, and he's seldom disappointed. But women want to be liked in forty different ways by forty different kinds of men, so they have to be up and at it."

This roused Althea to defend her sex, a thing she rarely took the trouble to do.

"That's nonsense," she said. "Women interest themselves in the arts because they love them."

Francis only looked at her and laughed, and said:

"How I adore artificial women!"

Althea never admitted to artificiality of any sort, and she changed the subject.

"But to go back to George, I still don't see why he shouldn't try to like some of the things I like."

"Well," Francis said, "if I were a woman, I'd fall in love with good shoulder muscles rather than with the ability to prattle about the Renaissance."

"I want both," she answered. "That's the trouble."

"I hate generalizations," Francis remarked. "But I've known a lot of American women, and I'll say this about them: They are at one and the same time the most intensely practical women in the world in fact, and the most romantic in theory. You very wisely married good old George, but you probably cherish a sentimental belief in elective affinities."

"I do," she cried. "I admit it."

"Then you're inviting a divorce, or a nervous breakdown, or both."

"I'm not at all a nervous subject, and I wouldn't divorce George for the world. I get a lot of pleasure out of thinking about my affinity."

"That proves what I said. I, on the contrary, find that nine pretty women out of ten are, or might be, my affinities."

"You'll be the one who'll have the nervous breakdown, then."

They both laughed. Their friendship was at this time on the happiest footing. They amused each other; it seemed very possible that they might, if either chose, fall in love; but Francis was still content to make semi-serious advances merely to give Althea the pleasure of ignoring them or turning them aside.

He was precisely the sort of man Althea—who had never since her marriage possessed an admirer who seemed to her convincing—had longed for. At home, George's friends liked her very much, but they liked her tamely, and they were always George's friends before they were hers. And Francis was not only a charming man and a man of the world who knew everybody worth knowing, but he was also heir to a peerage, being the son, by a quaint coincidence that seemed to Althea highly significant, of the Lord Beauvais who had crossed with them on the boat.

Althea, a snob herself, passionately admired and approved of a lack of snobbishness in other people, and Francis had not an atom of it. She knew she would never find a brighter jewel if she were to search England over, and she believed she could count on him for the dinner-parties she meant to give during the autumn and winter. Mary Monash, it was true, had a duke and a prince as devoted friends, but princes and dukes were apt to make a woman conspicuous, and Althea preferred something quieter in the way of a peer or an honourable.

Altogether it had been the greatest luck meeting him at Biarritz. George had met him first, on the golf links, and he had taken a liking to George at once, even before he saw Althea, which was reassuring.

It amused Francis to meet new people, particularly Americans, and he had a peculiar attraction for American women, due partly to his voice, with its agreeable and, to them, unfamiliar modulations, his knowledge of the things they liked to talk about, and his readiness to be amused. His birth, his tall figure and his distinguished features—he looked somewhat like Palmerston as a young man—did not detract from his charms. He disliked games of all sorts, although he occasionally played golf with an entire indifference as to whether he won or lost, and the only sports he really liked were ski-ing and salmon fishing in Norway. He rarely, Althea learned, lived at Hawfield Place with his

parents, heartily disliking English country life, and preferring to be in London or on the Continent. His sister was married to a French diplomat who had recently been sent to Washington, and it was to see her that his parents had gone to America.

Althea's pretensions amused him and he saw through them perfectly. He liked artificial women, he thought women should be artificial, and he often regretted that he had not been born in the early part of the eighteenth century, when an aristocracy of birth was not yet an anachronism. The fact that he disliked being the heir to a peerage and a large and unwieldy estate was no secret to anybody. He hated class consciousness, whether it was found at the top or at the bottom. At the same time he was ardently a royalist, and thought England should always have a king and queen—more particularly a queen—and that the rest of the population should be alternately drones and workers. He said that he had discovered the real truth about the bees, and that was that they were drones half the time and workers the other half, which was the only sensible arrangement.

Althea took very few of his utterances seriously. What she didn't know, and what only his best friends knew, was that his income was something like fifteen thousand a year, and that he lived on less than three, giving the rest to organizations of one sort and another and private charities of his own discovering. He also put money into the hands of a firm of publishers for the translation and publication of foreign books on art that couldn't hope to pay their own way. Consequently he was considered mean by many of his acquaintances, but his friends knew that this income, which had descended on him at twenty-one, irritated, distressed and worried him, and that the thought of spending more than a small portion of it on himself was repulsive to him. People laughed at his ancient but commodious Rolls, with its old-fashioned body, but to Althea it was that eccentric touch that seemed so right and necessary in the son of one of England's oldest families.

That Francis liked the sort of women he did was a cause of wonder to his relations and even, now and then, to himself. A sophisticated idealist—that is, one who dislikes and deplores the present state of things but knows too much of human nature to expect it to be changed very materially—he disliked idealism in the opposite sex, and serious-minded women inevitably put him to hasty and immediate flight. He liked actresses on the stage, but when they told him, off, as they always did, that they took their art seriously, he was bored. He liked women who made it their business to be decorative. He didn't even insist that they should be amusing; only amiable. Althea appealed to his eye, and owing to the fact that he saw through her and liked what he saw, her poses and her little ambitions only entertained and pleased him.

George, he said, combined simple saintliness and salesmanship in an adorable way. He liked men to work hard, he thought it right and proper, and he would have worked hard himself if there had been anything to work for; but women, he insisted, should be idle, ornamental and kind—for kindness was the Christian virtue he liked best.

It was unlikely that Althea could have understood him. Not even Mary Monash always understood him, and she had known him for twenty years; nor, in common with the rest of mankind, did he understand himself. It was natural that Althea should have misunderstood him, even to the extent that she did, for no one like him had ever come her way before.

Since knowing Francis, George's old belief that the English, particularly the upper classes, were dull, standoffish and cold, crumbled in a day, as so many prejudices do, at a single touch, and when he came home at a quarter past six that evening and found Francis there he was almost as glad to see him as he would have been to see Howard Peters or Bruce Chapman. He asked him to play golf with him on Saturday.

"No, I can't," Francis said; "I have to go down to Hawfield. I haven't been there since the end of June. My father wants me to shoot with him, but I've vowed a vow never again to raise my gun against bird or beast, if I can avoid it."

"Why?" Althea asked. It seemed to her almost immoral for a man in his position not to shoot.

Instead of answering her he said:

"It's curious, isn't it, this cult of the firearm? If I refuse to shoot birds I'm no sportsman, if I refuse to shoot men I'm a conscientious objector. I never could see the connexion between manliness and things that go off with a bang."

"I've never shot a man," George said, "or even shot at one. I didn't get any farther than the training camp in the War."

"I shot two Germans at short range in a dugout, during a raid on their trenches," said Francis. "It was my last day of fighting, almost *the* last day of fighting, just before the Armistice. They were nice-looking boys. They may have hoped about that time that they'd soon be home."

"It sounds awful now, of course," observed George. "Like murder."

"Will you tell your mother about us?" asked Althea, who disliked talk about the War. "She might just possibly remember us, or Cleve, anyway."

"I doubt it," he replied. "My mother's memory is a family joke. Father might. He'd remember you, I think. A pretty woman is still a pretty woman to him, even though she is nothing more. Well, I must go now. When I come back from Hawfield we'll have a party. I'll get Mary, and some other people. George, here's that list of addresses I said I'd give you. Everything from a hatter to a wine merchant. Tell them you come from me. It will still further advance the price usually reserved for Americans."

George went downstairs with him, and Althea stood by the fire wondering if Francis had liked her as much in

London as he had at Biarritz, and feeling that the afternoon had somehow been unsatisfactory, though she couldn't quite see how. Now that they were away from the more intimate environment of Biarritz, where she had seen him every day, he seemed more elusive, his life more complicated and unknown and outside her scope. She longed to keep him, to make him hers, hers as an admirer and devoted friend, nothing more. She saw that he was going to be necessary to the success and happiness of her life in London. The moment he left the room a dullness fell upon it and upon her and a hollow silence upon the house, only broken by the sudden throbbing of his car outside in the street. She wished herself irresistible, utterly, utterly irresistible, and, sighing a little, she picked up a new book on evolution in modern art and began to cut its pages.

V

LIFE HAD never before held for Althea such adorable possibilities. As she looked back on her life in New York, it seemed to her that she had merely been one of thousands of cave-dwellers inhabiting the cliff-like apartment-houses through which Park Avenue runs like a river in a deep cañon; that she had been one of the myriad wives of business men, women so similar that she wondered if their thoughts were not group thoughts and their emotions those of a race rather than of individuals. And now, for the first time, she felt that she stood out, with a personality of her own. She could feel herself growing and expanding, as though heretofore she had been like a small tree stifled in a thick wood. She was developing and reaching out, and taking long breaths of a more flattering air. Her house suited her and gave her a background, while she suited it. She was constantly meeting new people and widening her circle, until she felt herself to be in contact, at least, with most of the important circles in London, for if she didn't actually know the people in them, she knew people who did.

"Can't we dine by ourselves sometimes?" George asked one evening, when, on returning from the City, he was reminded that they were dining with Lady Causton.

"I don't know why you say 'sometimes.' We were alone on Monday night, and we'll be alone on Saturday night, as far as I know now."

"I haven't had a chance to look at the *Sunday Herald* or the *Tribune* yet."

"You poor darling!" She threw him a glance of good-humoured sarcasm. "You've got all next Sunday to do that."

"I'm playing golf on Sunday with Harry Sullivan."

"Who on earth's he?"

"He's a fellow I met down-town—in the City. He represents a Chicago firm over here. He plays a good game, and he belongs to that new club they've opened near Godalming."

"Brayton Park. Then I suppose you'll want the car?"

"Nope. We're going in his."

"George, for mercy's sake don't say nope. You know how I hate it."

"Oh, all right, I forgot. You'll come too, won't you? You could walk around with us. The country looks great now."

"I can't. I'm lunching with Mary, and we're going to hear some music afterwards. She asked you, too."

"Did she? Well, tell her I can't come because I'm playing golf. I'm sorry, but I need the exercise."

"That's all right. She never cares how many sit down to lunch on Sunday. But, George. . . ."

"Well?"

"Why do you always play with Americans? You meet lots of nice Englishmen who play golf."

"Oh . . . I don't know. I get on all right with them, but I like to talk to a Yank when I can. Harry's kind of hard-boiled, but I like him."

"Well, come upstairs now and see Cleve. I told him we'd be up about half-past six."

Half an hour later, on their way downstairs from the nursery, she said:

"What am I going to say to Lady Causton about that week-end party, December the sixth? I ought to let her know to-night."

"Why, just say anything you like. I'd like to go all right, but you know as well as I do I can't hit those darned birds. If she won't count on me as a gun I don't mind going; but I'm not going to make a fool of myself over a few long-tailed pheasants flying at about a mile a minute."

They had reached Althea's bedroom now, a pretty room with light blue walls and mulberry-coloured hangings, and she began dressing for dinner. George lingered for a few minutes, turning over the pages of a book that was lying on her sofa, then he went into his own dressing-room. Althea raised her voice to speak to him, her mind still occupied with the same subject.

"Well, you needn't shoot if you don't want to, but I wish you'd accept. Mary will be there, and perhaps Francis —he may not shoot either, you know he doesn't care about it—and I think Lord and Lady Bennington. I'm crazy to go. We've only been to one English house-party, and that was so small it hardly counts. And I can't go if you don't."

"All right. I'll go if I don't have to shoot."

"Of course you won't have to. But I wish to goodness you'd take lessons."

He made no reply to that, but presently asked:

"Is it a big place?"

"Whittleworth? I think it must be. I suppose there are about thirty-five or forty bedrooms. It's lovely country there, Francis says, and it's about the best shoot in the South of England. He says the birds come very high and fast."

"I won't be present when they come like that."

"Oh, well, there'll be plenty of other things to do," she said, slipping into a dressing-gown. "There's squash and tennis, and I suppose there'll be a golf course somewhere about."

"I'll amuse myself all right."

"All the same, George, I do think you might go to a shooting school to please me. If we're going to be here two years. . . ."

"There's only this autumn to get through, and one more. It isn't worth while."

His refusal to shoot really annoyed Althea. Men ought

to shoot. It was all right for Francis to be slightly eccentric if he wished. People would always ask him everywhere because he was Francis Mortlake, and one of the most desirable and amusing of guests, but George was different. There was so little, outside of business and golf, that he did care about. He didn't even trouble himself to talk much unless he happened to be in the mood, and in a crowd of strangers he made almost no effect at all.

Lady Causton, a friend of Mary Monash's, was the widow of a wealthy shipowner who had been made a peer a few years before his death. He was generous and public-spirited, and not undeserving of honours. He gave a large estate near London to the nation as a public park, and a museum and picture gallery to his native town in Yorkshire. He bought Whittleworth Park in June of one year and died of pneumonia the following January, and Lady Causton was left with an immense fortune that not even the death duties could diminish alarmingly, a large estate, and a plain girl of fourteen.

Two years after his death his widow began to plan the large parties he had intended her to give when he bought the place. She was a spirited, energetic little woman, an enthusiastic worker for the League of Nations and the English Speaking Union. She had gone to America with her husband in 1913, and remembering the hospitality they had received there, was constantly on the lookout for suitable opportunities to repay it. She was fifty, but looked younger, and had no intention of being anything but Lady Causton to the end of her days. In asking Althea and George to Whittleworth she was not only being kind, but she was also enhancing the success of her party by the addition of a very vivacious and attractive young woman. Lady Causton liked to have men about her, and she knew very well how to obtain them.

To George, she was someone he would have to be pleasant to for Althea's sake. He thought it extremely kind of her

to ask them to her house in London and her place in the country on such a short acquaintance, but he was beginning to take these readily proffered kindnesses—which were due to the charms of his wife—almost for granted now. He said to Harry Sullivan on the golf course that Sunday:

"You know, I like England darned well, and I like the English. They're tolerant and broadminded, and I guess they're sincere, and the ones we've met have certainly been kind. And in lots of ways life here is easier and pleasanter than in the States. But all the same, I'll be glad to get home. I'm not exactly homesick. I've never been homesick since the night before I left New York. But I sort of like being where I belong."

Harry Sullivan, whom George had described as "hard-boiled," answered:

"Maybe I'd like England better if I was in your place. You're lucky. You've got a good-looking wife. It's the women who get on here. Countries don't matter a damn to them. I guess it's because they never have to fight for the flag, or even take off their hats to it. Humans like the things that cost them something, and patriotism don't cost women anything."

"Oh, they're naturally more adaptable," George said.

"Adaptable hell! Not in the great open spaces they're not. Not nowadays. I hadn't been married a year when I took my wife—she was a Chicago girl—out to the oilfields in Wyoming. She beat it for home before she'd been out there six months, and the first thing I heard of her was the divorce papers she served up on me."

It amused George to listen to Harry Sullivan's views on life and on women. He had a sort of crude sagacity, and though his humour was of the comic supplement order, he liked it. He abandoned the idea, however, of introducing him to Althea. She was as particular whom she met nowadays as a nervous debutante. He understood perfectly her enthusiasm for such people as Mary Monash and Francis

Mortlake, but he dreaded their unsettling effect. He saw there was danger that Althea might think their old friends inferior, instead of merely different. It wasn't a question of degree, but of kind, and he wasn't quite sure he could trust her to see this.

They motored to Whittleworth Park in Essex on a Friday afternoon, a frosty day which had begun by being foggy, but which was now redly lighted by a sun like a holly berry. They had not bought a Rolls, as Althea had frequently urged, but a comfortable second-hand Buick that George considered filled all their requirements. When people asked Althea what sort of car they had—for this is a question that people, for obscure reasons, do ask—she longed to be able to say, with a casualness she would take care not to overdo, "A Rolls." She was angry with George for some time about it, but it was useless to be angry with George for long, and in this instance he ignored her disapproval.

They went through Epping Forest, richly brown with the minor tones of autumn, and passed tidy villages on whose greens the leaves lay in sodden patches. They undulated through woods and over hills, and their chauffeur, Beale, an Essex man himself, knew Whittleworth Park and was pleased to be going there.

"He'll think more of us for knowing Lady Causton," George said with a grin, but Althea preferred to take their friendship with the widow of a rich peer as a matter of course, and ignored his remark. And yet titles and the proper attitude to adopt toward them occupied her mind a good deal.

They approached Whittleworth through a woody lane that left the main road and ascended a gentle hill, on the top of which were the great iron gates of the park. Beyond these the drive led for a mile or more through a stretch of timbered parkland where cattle grazed and pheasants ran clucking across the road, all of which seemed to Althea delightfully English and right. The gabled, red-brick house, built about

eighty years ago in the Elizabethan manner, lay just beyond an ornamental lake, round which the driveway curved, ending in a wide sweep before the door. Menservants came out and took their things, and they were shown into the drawing-room, where Lady Causton was serving tea.

Althea saw at a glance that Francis had not yet come, but Mary Monash was there, as also were Lord and Lady Bennington, a Miss Poynter, a man named Captain Northey, and a Mrs. Tilling, an American. George felt, among all these strangers, that Mary Monash was like a sister, so he sat down beside her, near the fire.

She was a tall, graceful woman of about thirty-eight, with hair turned prematurely grey, and large, deeply set blue eyes of considerable beauty. She was wearing a tight-fitting jersey of dark blue with a short, woollen skirt, and about her neck was a string of magnificent, luminous pearls. Her hands were long and flexible, with beautiful nails. She was very thin, and her cheeks as well as her eyes were hollow. She was a sad creature, who lived gaily, and it was understood that she was still in love with her husband, from whom she had been separated for some years.

She called George by his Christian name, and had done so since their third or fourth meeting, but George, who usually took to Christian names very easily, could not, for some reason, call her Mary, so he called her nothing at all. No two people disagreed about Mary Monash. She seemed to have only two sides, instead of the many facets most women showed. One side she kept to herself, and everyone she knew saw the other. She was lovely, she was sad, she was generous-hearted. None of these things was open to dispute. She tried hard to make her life amusing and gay, as though at any moment she feared she might see its real substance and recoil from it. She had become a Catholic after her husband's most public and humiliating infidelity. Unable to bear her troubles alone, she had found a great wide lap into which to fling them and to lay her head and

weep. Her languid beauty and elegance made George feel heavy and inadequate, but had he realized it she was the least captious and critical of women. She accepted humanity in a generous and tolerant spirit, and found something to like in everyone. She found a great deal to like in George, whose natural chivalry she felt and responded to. She thought him likeable, even lovable, and wanted him to see it.

"I wondered if Althea could persuade you to come," she said, fixing a cigarette into a long holder. "A shooting party isn't much fun for a man who doesn't shoot."

"Oh, I guess I can amuse myself all right," said George, "if Lady Causton doesn't mind."

"Of course she doesn't. I think I'd go out with them once, though, if I were you, just to see how it's done. It's quite interesting, if you've never seen it. I suppose I shall go . . . though I hate the noise and the awful thud, thud of falling bodies."

"What do you go for, then?"

"Oh, it's expected of one. The men like to be seen if they are shooting well, and consoled if they're not. Besides, the woods are lovely, and I'm greedy enough to enjoy a shooting lunch."

"I don't think I'll go, all the same," he said, and was about to say more when Francis Mortlake came in, on the heels of the elderly butler who announced him. He was wearing tweeds that looked threadbare at the elbows and about the pockets, and was followed by a fat and ancient spaniel that he always took with him if no objections were made. In country clothes he looked somewhat less Palmerstonian, but no less striking. He knew everyone in the room with the exception of Mrs. Tilling, who regarded him covertly and covetously, for she was an ambitious giver of parties and found suitable men difficult to come by.

"I've beaten my own record to-day," he told them. "It took me three hours and a half to come down from London,

and I never stopped once. That's the most time I've ever made it in." He turned to Mrs. Tilling, who was listening to him with the eager, approving face of one who wishes to establish a feeling of sympathy from the start, and said, "I consider that the proper speed of a car is that of a coach and four, and no more. If my chauffeur can't keep down to that, he has to go. I've covered a good part of Europe at sixteen miles an hour."

"How interesting!" Mrs. Tilling exclaimed. "And most original. But didn't it take you a long time?"

He threw Althea a glance, as though to say, "And to think that the same country that produced you, produced her!"

Now that Francis had come, Althea's happiness was complete. Something might have happened to prevent it, or he might have changed his mind—he wasn't fond of country-house visits—but here he was, and all was very well. She was having the most enchanting flirtation with him. It had reached a stage where both suspected that the other was the more seriously involved, and they would now have three evenings and two whole days in which to develop it. George had Mary Monash to talk to whom he liked, and he would probably get on very well with Miss Poynter, who, her father being a diplomat, had lived in Washington and other capitals. Althea considered that she needn't worry about him, and she certainly didn't intend to.

Lady Causton said they wouldn't wait for the rest of the party, who would probably arrive just before dinner, and she took Althea and George upstairs to show them their rooms. Althea regretted that it wasn't a historic mansion they were staying in, but she admired the way it was arranged and furnished, and took note of many a detail, commenting aloud on the beauty of the wide, carved staircase, which Lady Causton said had come out of an old Essex mansion that was now destroyed. She opened a door

on the first floor and showed them into a big, square room in which was a fine four-poster bed. It was bright with chintz hangings, and was made cheerful by a wood fire.

"Your husband's room is just beyond," she said, leading the way into the adjoining room, "and the bathroom is here, through this door. There were only two bathrooms when we bought the house, and we had to put in seven more, but there are still hardly enough. I do hope you'll be comfortable, and that you'll ring if you want anything. I think it's so clever of you to manage without a maid. I wish I could. Dinner's at half-past eight. You'll hear a loud gong. It's the only way to get people down on time."

When she had gone, Althea exclaimed:

"George, I ought to have a maid. I'm probably the only woman here who hasn't got one. I feel mortified to death."

"Well, you can have one if you like; but I always thought you said they were more trouble than they were worth."

"I used to think that, but I don't now. Lady Causton seemed quite surprised. Perhaps they don't like people to come without maids."

"Nonsense," said George who was often right.

"I'll ask Mary. I know she's brought hers."

George inspected the bed with interest. He had never slept in a four-poster before. He looked at a glittering white dress that was spread out on it.

"How do they know that's the dress you want to wear?"

"They don't, but it doesn't matter. I brought three nice ones, and I don't mind which I put on first."

"It's new, isn't it?"

"Yes; I bought two new ones. I thought I told you." She added, "George, isn't this going to be fun?"

"I don't know. I guess it will be for you." He was examining the prints on the walls now. "I feel like a sort of Hick from Hickville at a party like this."

"I do hate to hear you say things like that. Goodness me, you can do exactly as you please here. There's no ceremony or stiffness. I don't see what there is to worry you."

"It's all right for you," he told her. "You fit in anywhere, like water."

"Well, so can you, if you make the effort. Anyhow, the men will be nice to you because you're a stranger and Englishmen have good manners; and the women will be nice to you because you're a man and good-looking."

He had wandered to the dressing-table now, and he stood facing himself in the glass.

"Would you call me good-looking? Honestly?"

"You idiot, George. You know you are."

"I don't know it. You never said so before."

"Liar. I've said it dozens of times."

"Before we were married, maybe. I'm not as good-looking as Francis Mortlake."

"Oh, well, it's a different sort of good looks. Francis is an unusually distinguished-looking man. I don't think any country but England produces just that type."

She came to the dressing-table and pulled off her rings. George turned to her and took her in his arms. He kissed her forehead and her cheek. The firelight, the warm room, the stillness, the bright, closely drawn curtains suddenly made him feel happy and tender.

"Are you satisfied with your old George, baby?"

She made an impatient little movement.

"Call me anything you like except that."

"Angel. Sweetest."

"Well, that's better."

"Answer me. Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Satisfied with your old George?"

"I wish you'd make a little more effort to please me."

"All right; I will. Watch me."

"Yes, but promise."

"Kiss me and I'll promise."

"You'll forget all about it to-morrow and be just the same."

"Well, kiss me and see if I will."

"You ridiculous creature. I want to get dressed."

She kissed him, arms about his neck, but the kiss was perfunctory, and before it was done her thoughts had fled away elsewhere, and George knew this and was a little hurt and angry. But he had forgotten it by the time the gong sounded and they went down to dinner—dread in George's heart, and eager anticipation in Althea's.

He soon found that he was happily placed. He sat between Lady Bennington and a late arrival, a woman of middle age. He had no difficulty whatever in carrying on a conversation with Lady Bennington, who told him that they had had a lovely old place in Donegal which had been burnt to the ground in the late "bad times," and that they now lived in a modern brick villa not more than twenty miles away; that they had two boys at school and almost no money, but that they kept two racehorses because both she and her husband adored racing and were tolerably lucky on the turf; that her name was Clodagh, and her husband's Shane; that they were passionately devoted to each other; that she could only afford two evening dresses a year.

Then she told stories of a wild and penurious girlhood that were quite unspoilt by a little native exaggeration, and he wondered, amused, if there were anything at all she wouldn't tell him. But he enjoyed her talk, and was sorry when Captain Northey diverted her to himself. He then turned to the middle-aged lady, and saw that her name-card was turned over, presenting to him only a bleak, white surface. She appeared to notice that he was silent, for she turned her head and smiled at him, and he saw her face for the first time. Her features were decided, her nose short, her chin rounded and well formed, and her brow very fine and wide. Her eyebrows, unlike her hair, which was mixed with grey, were still black, and made handsome arches over

her brown eyes. It was a determined face, but animated and humorous.

"Tell me your name," she said; "I'm lost till I know."

George picked up his card and gave it to her.

"Goodall is my name," he said.

She looked at him with eyes that were sparkling with amusement. Then she burst out laughing with perfectly spontaneous mirth and offered him her card, still laughing.

"I don't know why," she said, "but it strikes me as exceedingly funny. It's the sort of silly joke that always makes me giggle."

George looked at the card, and a smile spread over his own features. He read on it, "Mrs. Allgood."

"Well, that certainly is comic," he agreed.

"Do you suppose Cynthia Causton saw the joke when she put us together? Of course she must. I'll tell her how we enjoyed it."

George said that it was a very odd and amusing coincidence.

"You've got the best of it," he assured her. "Allgood's a prettier name than Goodall."

She made a slight grimace.

"I don't care anything about prettiness. There are moments when I dislike all goodness. The truth is," she said, lowering her voice, "I'm in a bad temper, and only the silly fact that your name is like mine backwards could restore me to anything like good humour."

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked.

"I thought I was going to spend a happy and quiet week-end at home with some new books," she explained. "Instead of that I'm understudying some young thing with a cold in her head. I'm a fill in, you see. I hardly ever go to parties nowadays, but Cynthia rang me up at five and begged and implored and even sent her car for me, so here I am. I'm so fond of Cynthia, I never can say a firm 'No' to her. But I'm beginning to feel more cheerful."

George told her it was the first big house-party he'd ever been to, and that he didn't shoot.

"What will you do all day to-morrow then, you poor soul?"

"Oh, I'll just fool around. Maybe I can get a game of golf somewhere, and if I can't do that, I'll go for a walk."

"I don't play any games, so I'm no good to you there, but I could walk till Doomsday."

"Say, that would be great," George said. "Let's take a walk somewhere. Where'll we go?"

She considered for a moment, while George, curiously attracted by something harmonious and pleasing in her face, looked at her.

"I've thought of an excellent plan," she presently said, turning towards him again. "Of course you have a car here with you?"

"I have. But why 'of course'?"

"My reasoning is so obvious. Don't force me to explain. Well, in the morning we'll walk through the woods and across the fields by a path I know to my house, about seven miles away. We'll lunch there with my husband, who will be delighted to see me again so soon and then your car could call for us in the afternoon and bring us back. I want to retrieve a nail-file I left behind, and I'd like to show you my house. Also, the walk through the woods is very pleasant unless it pours."

"That'll suit me fine. When do we start?"

"As soon as the guns have got off, I think. I suppose your wife will be going with them."

George said she would be sure to go.

"Do you know which she is?" he inquired.

"Of course. She's that pretty woman in white next to Francis Mortlake. I think they drown all the ugly ones in your country. At least, we never see any here. I sometimes wish we did."

He asked her if she knew Francis Mortlake. She did, and she said she liked him.

"I like him for appearing entirely frivolous, and for not being so. He's a charming creature, and full of contradictions. I don't think civilization can do much better than to go on producing Francis Mortlakes. Unfortunately it will never produce enough. I think, in a way, he does God quite a lot of credit."

George, a little nonplussed at the way she spoke of God, agreed that Francis was a fine fellow.

"Oh, he's much more and much less than that. He's a thoroughly civilized person. He's a hopeful cynic, a savant with the simplest tastes, and a kindly sensualist. Civilization, in spite of all one may find to say against it, has a great deal to give us, and very few of us, either through laziness, disinclination or lack of opportunity, take what it has to give. Francis Mortlake has taken almost everything. He has no arrogance, in spite of that—neither the arrogance of birth nor that of brains, and they are equally insufferable. The arrogance of wealth," she added, "I hardly like to speak about in the same room with Mrs. Tilling, and it's the worst of all."

"Why Mrs. Tilling?"

"She's the perfect example of it. She's the only one of Cynthia's friends I can't endure. I don't think of her as one of your countrywomen, because she doesn't think of herself as one. She's ousted everything in her that she thinks is American, and adopted everything she thinks is English, and, poor soul, she's wide of the mark both ways."

"Have you ever been to America?" he asked.

"Yes; but don't let's impart our life stories to each other yet. We can do that to-morrow. If your wife has made a friend of Francis Mortlake, she's very lucky, for he's a liberal education for any woman."

"I don't know that I want my wife taught anything,"

George remarked, "by Mortlake or anyone else. I prefer her as she is."

"I was thinking of her good, not of yours."

"I want things to stay as they are," he insisted.

"Which of course, they never do."

"Well, I don't see the good of experiences that make you restless and unhappy."

"Oh," she said, "that's nonsense. There's no point in living if you're not learning, and experience is still the best teacher. If living doesn't mean learning, it's just a silly sort of joke. So you see how valuable I think experience is."

"I wish I agreed with you," he answered, "but I don't. I think you're dead wrong. I think it's up to us to try to avoid experiences. Unless, of course, a man's bored with his life. And I'm not bored."

"You poor soul," she said. "You've got some horrid surprises ahead of you. To anyone who is really alive, experiences are bound to come. We differ in this: I welcome them—unless they're clearly tragedies—you deplore them. But come they will and must. So let's get something out of them."

"Do you advocate going out of your way to find them?"

"No; the ones that matter come to you." Suddenly, after a pause, she said, "I ought to talk to the rather stupid old gentleman on my right now. He apologized to me a moment ago for speaking about the possibility of a general election. England, you'll find, is the only country in the world where women are really interested in politics, and it's the only country in the world where men still apologize to women for mentioning them."

"Don't talk to him yet," George begged. "I'm just thanking my lucky stars that the young woman with the cold couldn't come. Tell me, what do we do after dinner?"

"It's no good asking me," she said; "I tell you I never go to parties any more. They say the dancing craze is on

the wane, so we'll probably talk, or play bridge, or perhaps they'll play pencil and paper games."

"Gosh!" exclaimed George. "Dancing is the only one of those things I'm any good at, and I only talk when I can find someone like you to talk to. Let me come and sit by you after dinner, will you?"

"You're like a *jeune fille* at her first ball," she said. "Yes, we'll meet later, unless you're snatched from me by someone else. I'll try to find a sofa and keep a place for you."

When she got up from the table and went out with the other women, he regarded her back with interest. She was wearing a dress of thin, grey material, cleverly draped on a figure that was not slim, but was erect and well-proportioned. Her thick, iron-grey hair had a handsome diamond ornament through it. He wasn't given to analysis, and he only knew that he liked her and that he hoped she'd be able to keep that place for him.

The old gentleman who had been sitting on her right now turned to him and began to talk. He appeared to find the fact that George was an American highly diverting, even ridiculous, as though it were a nationality that no one in their senses could possibly take seriously. He was a little pink-and-white old man with a great white moustache, and his name was Sir Bartley Hopkyns. He had been to America during the war on some mission or other, and he at once began relating his impressions to George. His attitude seemed to be that George had made America, was personally responsible for everything in it, and at the same time didn't know anything about it. The things that had impressed him most were the heat of Washington in July, soft-shelled crabs, and the fact that Americans said skedule instead of schedule.

"You call it skedule over there," he repeated with senile relish. "Fancy calling it skedule! Skedule! Fancy!"

A very silly old man, George was forced to conclude, and he wished he would leave him alone so that he could listen

to Francis and Lord Bennington, who were talking politics and calling all the famous men fools, liars, and drunkards with happy freedom. Presently, however, Sir Bartley said all he had to say on his three American topics, and George was drawn into conversation with Captain Northey and a Mr. Faulkiner, who were talking about golf, so that he was agreeably occupied until they left the dining-room.

VI

BUT MR. FAULKINER, who happened to precede him out of the room, found the empty place beside Mrs. Allgood before he did, and occupied it. To Mr. Faulkiner it was merely a place to sit, and George caught an amused glance from her which told him that she knew this and thought it funny. He presently found a comfortable harbour beside Miss Poynter, who had been in Washington with her father till illness ended his duties there. She was a robust, handsome girl, as friendly as a child, and he learnt that she was engaged to Captain Northey, which seemed very suitable, for he was as freshly coloured and as robust as herself. It was Miss Poynter who, when pencil and paper games were decided on, encouraged and supported him.

"They're fun," she insisted, "and they break the ice. I promise you they're not hard, and you can say anything you like in this house—within reason, of course. They always tell me I'm vulgar, but I can't help it. Vulgar thoughts just come into my head the moment I have a pencil in my hand."

"Gosh, what a best seller you'd write!" George exclaimed.

She laughed.

"I'll have to wait till I'm married to Dick, then. All my family are extremely proper. I have to suppress my vulgarity at home, which seems a pity these days, when it's at such a premium."

They decided on telegrams, after a good deal of discussion, and the word chosen was cinematograph. George, his mind an absolute blank at first, looked about him at the oak-panelled room, admiring the great fall of the red velvet curtains that were drawn across the windows, the wide stone

fireplace with its log fire, the half circle about it of chairs and sofas filled with pensive beings who, if they spoke, spoke in whispers. Miss Poynter murmured: "You'd better get on with it," and he settled down to his task. When he had written a telegram he thought would do, he looked across at Althea. She was sitting on a sofa between Francis and Lord Bennington, and looked very happy and bright of eye. In fact she looked, George thought, as though playing pencil and paper games between a peer and an honourable was what she had been born for.

Lady Bennington sat on a low stool with her back to the fire, having remarked that she was never warm out of bed, and near her was Colonel Accrington, who had arrived just before dinner. Mary Monash was in dead, unrelieved black, and at night her bones looked more fragile and her eyes bluer and hollower than by day. Lady Causton was the least noticeable of the women, being entirely outdressed and outshone by Mrs. Tilling, who wore a gown of green spangles that looked well enough with her artificially red hair. A good deal of whispering went on between Althea and Francis, and suppressed laughter, and when the time came for the telegrams to be read, Althea, playing the part of censor, tore up something Francis had written, and the one he read out was clearly a hurried afterthought. He was persuaded to begin:

"Concubinage in Near East managed admirably. Think our girls ridiculously antiquated. Prefer harems."

This caused a good deal of amusement. George was a little surprised at its impropriety, thinking the company rather mixed for that sort of thing, but he looked at Lady Causton, and saw that she was laughing as much as anyone. Francis, he supposed, being who he was, would probably go further than other people dared to go. Lord Bennington's was:

"Caught in Nice early Monday. Already tired of Gladys. Returning, asking pardon humbly."

They were all absurd and mildly *risqué*, and George saw that his own was going to sound very flat and dull, but he couldn't help it. It was all very well to be slightly improper if one knew exactly how improper to be, and he wasn't sure he did. Mrs. Allgood read hers next:

"Curbing impatience not easy. Must arrange together obtain good rendezvous, avoiding prying husband."

When it came to Miss Poynter's turn, she read:

"Come immediately, nobody expected, mother away, tempting opportunity grasp rare and precious hours."

"Why is it one never gets a telegram like that?" mourned Francis, in the midst of the laughter. Then George's turn came, and his spirits sank as he read out:

"Capital invested new enterprise may amass thousands. Opportunity golden, returning amazing profits. Hopeful."

They told him it was very good, but he realized that the whole object of these games was to provoke mirth. However, he hadn't actually made a fool of himself as he might have done, and he was thankful for it. He presently had another moment of panic when two words, written independently by two different people were given to him, and he was told to make up a poem bringing them both in. The words were "high-brow" and "mustard." It looked impossible, and he was almost in despair, when four lines suddenly swung into his head, seemingly from nowhere, and he wrote them down thankfully, believing that something very like inspiration had come to him, to keep him from disaster. When fifteen minutes had passed, everyone read their own poems aloud. Some of them were elaborate and skilful; all of them except Sir Bartley Hopkyns's were competent, and then George read, after announcing the given words:

"If you're married to a highbrow,
Never by her brains be flustered,
If she raise a scornful eyebrow,
Say, 'My darling, pass the mustard.' "

He wasn't exactly proud of it, but he hoped it would pass, like the mustard, and was surprised and embarrassed by the success it had. Francis was willing to wager that no poet, alive or dead, could have done better with the two given words in a verse of four lines. It said, he assured them, everything. Observe the firmness and at the same time the tenderness of the last line. There was not a word too many or a word too few. If only all husbands could be at the same time so final and so forbearing. See how it took the wind out of the sails of the highbrow wife. What was there left for her to say? Nothing. It was an admirable example of compression and repression. George was thankful when attention was presently diverted to someone else.

When they went up to bed at about eleven, he couldn't make up his mind whether he had really enjoyed the evening or whether the pleasant glow of which he was conscious was caused by the mere fact that he had got through it without disgrace. In their bedroom Althea said:

"Those silly games were rather fun. I was thankful you had Miss Poynter next to you I felt sure she'd be able to help you. She's awfully bright."

To which George replied, indignantly:

"Help me be damned! She never helped me. I didn't want any help. I could go on making up rhymes till the cows come home."

Althea breakfasted in bed the next morning, but she was down in time to start off with the guns at ten, and George watched her walking away at Francis's side, dressed, although she had never been out shooting before, precisely as the other women were, and with a raincoat over her arm, as the day was cloudy. The party made a picture that was pleasing to the eye, with dogs, guns, tweeds in soft, russet colours, and the many warm browns of boots, leggings, scarves and canvas. They went down the drive towards the woods, and presently melted into the background and were lost to sight. George and Mrs. Allgood then turned their

own steps in the opposite direction, crossing the terrace and the lawn, skirting the lake, and entering the woods on the far side by a path she knew.

She said there was no hurry; they had three hours in which to walk seven miles, and she thought walking should be merely an excuse for talking and looking at the scenery.

"What a pretty creature your wife is! How long have you been married, and have you got children?"

She heard a good deal then about George's past and present. He was one of those men who have only men friends, and to these he told nothing at all, their friendship being quite satisfactorily based on funny stories, golf and the pursuit of drinks. To talk about himself to a woman other than his wife was a new and exhilarating experience. She egged him on, asked abrupt questions, made, now and then, comments that were so delicately ironical that they missed fire, and when he began to tell her how wonderful Althea was, how quick, how clever and adaptable, she broke in:

"Yes, yes, I know all about that. *All* American husbands say that about their wives, even after the divorce. When an American husband tells me he has the most wonderful little wife in the world, I know it's quite probable that within the next few days I shall hear she's divorcing him on the grounds of incompatibility." And as George looked rebuffed and surprised she hastened to say, "I'm not doubting you for a moment. I can see she's a very charming young woman, but I think this habit of wife-praising is bad and dangerous. A happy man ought to be silent about his wife's perfections, and an unhappy man ought to be even more silent, or else say what he really thinks about her, if it relieves his feelings. There's been too much sentimental woman-worship in your country, and I tremble to think what the reaction will be like." She went on, as George still said nothing. "The fact is, I've got a lot of sympathy for American men. They've been told so often that they're good at business and good for nothing else, that they've ended by believing it."

"When were you in America?" George asked.

"Oh, I know what I'm talking about, I promise you. I've crossed the Atlantic twenty times. I've seen the skyline of New York change from a low, irregular outline to the amazing thing it is now. I've been snowed up in your Overland trains, I've been half suffocated with sand and dust in your desert, I've slept in many a bed in the Blackstone Hotel, in Chicago, I've eaten cod-fish cakes at the Parker House, in Boston, and many's the good breakfast I've had at the Holland House, New York—yes, I know it's gone now. I've jingled in a sleigh through Central Park, and loved it, and I've seen the autumn colours blaze in the woods along the Hudson. I've eaten terrapin in Baltimore, and I once saw a bear in the Rockies. I knew Chinatown as it used to be before the fire in San Francisco, and twenty years ago I danced to an automatic piano in one of those road-houses on the beach. I've seen the sun rise in the Yosemite, and seen it set in the Yellowstone, and I remember seeing women crying in the streets of New York the day President McKinley was shot. . . ."

"Say," broke in George, "what were you selling anyhow?"

"That's good old native American humour," she said, laughing. "It always pleases me. Well, take a look at me and tell me what you think I was selling?"

George looked at her. He saw what he had seen last night, a not unhandsome woman of perhaps fifty, strongly and sturdily made, with brown eyes full of vitality and animation. Younger, thinner, she must have been extremely attractive. But he wasn't going to trust himself to guess.

"What do you think I am—or was?" she demanded.

"Nothing doing. I'm not going to make any fool guesses. I'd a whole lot rather be told."

"I belong to a curious profession," she said. "If you say a woman looks like a writer, it conveys nothing, unless perhaps it means that she looks intelligent. But if you say that a woman looks like an actress—well, you know what is

generally meant by that. However, I am, or was, an actress. I was Kate Blaine."

"You!" exclaimed George. "Kate Blaine?"

"I was. I am. I feel like her still. My career was cut short. At thirty-eight I married William Matheson Allgood, a professor of science at Cambridge. You won't have heard of him unless you're interested in science yourself. I never went back to the stage after that, never once, not even for so much as a charity matinée. Think of it!"

"Why, good Lord, then I saw you act, in New York," George said. "It was years ago. I think my mother took me."

She smiled.

"Very likely. What did you see me in?"

"Oh, one of those Ibsen plays, I think it was."

"I played Nora in *The Doll's House* there one winter."

"I believe that was it. Yes; I remember now. I thought it was a rotten play, but I thought you were great."

"Reverse your adjectives," she suggested, "and you'd be nearer the mark. No, that's not true. I was good in that part, and the play was very nearly great a dozen or more years ago. Now . . . no. It's rather like a tempest in a glass of milk. So many of the plays of that period do seem like that now."

George said he didn't think he'd been to any of the others.

"When you go to the theatre," she asked him, "what do you like to see?"

"Oh, musical plays, generally, or a good farce."

"Yes; that's all right. I hate prigs and highbrows. Still, it's a pity not to have read the old plays, at least. Otherwise, one has no way of making comparisons, and one's opinion is of no value."

"Althea . . ." George began, but she interrupted him.

"Oh, yes, your wife . . . I know what you were going to say. She's the clever, well-read one; she's the one who goes to plays and lectures. But what good does that do you? Oh, why, I wonder, do so many people settle down to the enjoyment of mental coma after twenty?"

"That's right," George said. "Pitch into me. I guess I need it."

But she stopped abruptly, apologizing for her criticisms. It was her dreadful habit of speaking her mind, she said. She then began to tell him about her house, which she described as a small, seventeenth-century manor.

"My husband bought it for me when we became engaged. I'm afraid it was a sort of bait. I had never had a home. I had lived for sixteen years in hotels and furnished flats that were filled with other people's silver-mounted photographs. He followed me to Philadelphia, where I was playing in *The Gay Lord Quex*, and he showed me pictures of Mullion. We went for a long drive, and I cried bitterly because I was so moved and touched by the pathos of this last, despairing assault, and so undecided. He had been trying to marry me then for five years. I wanted to harden my heart against him, and against those hedges of clipped yew and the great mulberry tree my windows would look out upon. I was afraid of myself, and of my love for my profession—for I did love it—but he was too clever for me, and I followed him home as soon as my contract expired.

"And then?" George prompted her.

"We were married, in London, and for more than six years we were absolutely happy. Then four years ago we went to Crete to stay with a great friend of his, an archaeologist who was making excavations there, and he got rheumatic fever for the second time in his life, and almost died of it. It left him crippled with rheumatism and, of course, weakened his heart. He goes to Pau each winter with a devoted sister, and then I leave Mullion and take a flat in London by myself. In the summer we go to Aix together. But I'm afraid he's as well now as he ever will be, and you'll see for yourself how far from well that is."

George said it must be awful to be a cripple and do nothing for the rest of your days.

"Oh," she said, "he gets about a little on crutches, and

his mind is as active as ever. He writes a good deal, and that makes life bearable to him."

"I guess you do that," remarked George.

"Oh, I help. He's very fond of his sister. That's why I let them go away together every year. She likes me well enough, but she can't forgive me for having been an actress."

"Say, you don't mean to tell me there's anyone living to-day who thinks like that?"

"My sister-in-law. She's older than I am, and although spinsterhood is a state for which I have nothing but respect and awe, and sometimes a little envy, it *is* apt to warp one's views. At least I think a spinster has to take more care to keep them unwarped than a married woman."

She was silent for a few moments, pursuing her own thoughts, then she lifted up her face to the tall beech trees under which they walked, and quoted, half aloud:

" 'Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.'

"I'm sorry. Quoting's a horrid habit unless you quote to yourself."

"It's pretty," George said.

"Yes; I always think Shakespeare puts things rather neatly, don't you?"

Her irony was lost on him, or he gave no sign.

"What's the rest of it?"

She began:

" 'That time of year thou mayst in me behold.' "

and recited the whole sonnet, slackening her pace as she did so. He listened not so much to the poem as to her voice, with its rich tones, and watched her lively face. When she came to the last line:

"To love that well which thou must leave ere long,"

he was moved. He wondered if she hated growing old, if she had learnt that particular sonnet for that very reason, and he felt something of the sadness a woman feels whose youth is slipping through her grasp. She had made him feel it, such was the power of a voice, exquisitely used. He was silent for a moment, then he said:

"I'm afraid I don't know much Shakespeare. I've only read two of the plays, and that was when I was in college. And I saw John Barrymore in *Hamlet*."

"And I suppose you've never read the sonnets at all?"

"No; I'm afraid I haven't."

She turned despairing eyes on him.

"If I knew you a little better I'd tell you what I thought of you."

"Well, we'll just stay right here until you feel you know me well enough, because I want to hear it."

This was disarming. She laughed and said:

"I think you're a very charming young man, but I'd rather like to shake you. Why, why do you close your mind to so much? Don't you know that a knowledge of Shakespeare will make human beings seem more human, and humanity in general a little above the beasts that perish? That it will help you to bear with yourself and to understand your wife? That it affects the mere buying of a hat or the selling of an office desk? Why, a man who doesn't know Shakespeare is like a ship with a defective compass. Ignore the past and the literature of the past, my dear, *dear* Mr. Goodall, and you see the present with one purblind eye."

"That's great," George said. "Go ahead, I like it."

She went ahead:

"I used Shakespeare's name as a symbol, because he's the greatest of them all, but I mean to include all the great ones. What can you know of your own republic if you know nothing of Plato's? What can art to-day mean to you if you know nothing of Titian and Velasquez and Rembrandt? Of what use is poetry to you if you don't know Shelley?

And what can you know of the drama, or of the drama of human life, if you don't know Shakespeare? Why, it's a sort of death-in-life. You're like a two-dimensional creature living in a world without shadows."

"I've always wondered what I was," said George; "now I know."

"If you were dull of comprehension," she went on, "I'd say nothing. One doesn't quarrel with a vegetable for being a vegetable. But you've got the lively humour of most Americans, the mental quickness, the vitality. And it's all used up in making money and in having a Good Time. Oh, I know. I've seen something of your Good Times. We can't afford it here on that scale, and it's a blessing we can't, for we are imitating you more and more where we can. And the French can afford it even less. Frugality and poverty, by the grace of God, have made the Frenchman, and in a lesser degree the Englishman, a more intellectual being than the American."

"I guess that's pretty true," agreed George.

She put a penitent hand on his arm.

"Now I've said enough. I'm afraid I've said too much. Just over that hill is Mullion. You can see the smoke from the chimneys. Remind me not to leave without my nail-file, won't you?"

But George had enjoyed her lecture. He found it agreeable to be discussed by her, and he was flattered that she thought it worth while.

"You advise me to begin my education by reading Shakespeare, then?" he persisted.

"Certainly."

"All right. I'll read him this winter. Didn't you say something about taking a flat in London? When does that happen?"

"After Christmas. In February, very likely. I'll let you know."

"That'll be great. I'd like you to get to know Althea."

She smiled at him.

"It's you I like. You're so natural. It's charming. Only Americans and very young or very old Englishmen are like that."

"Oh, well," returned George modestly, "I guess there isn't much credit in being natural if you don't know how to be anything else."

VII

THE SHOOTING party had already returned when they got back. Mrs. Allgood went straight into the library for a late cup of tea, and George helped himself to a drink in the hall and went upstairs to find Althea. He saw her muddy little boots outside the door. She was in her bath, so he called out to her that he was back, and she replied that she would be out in a minute. She was some time, however, and meanwhile the things he was primed to tell her had to wait. He sat by the fire and re-lived the events of one of the pleasantest days he had ever spent. When Althea emerged in her dressing-gown, her face flushed and radiant, she exclaimed at once:

"Oh, George, I do wish you had come with us! It was simply heavenly. I've never enjoyed anything so much. What an idiot you are not to shoot! It must be too exciting for words. I think I'll learn. And then the woods, and the red sun, and the pheasants whirring overhead, and the cries of the beaters, and the banging of the guns—it's lovely. Those men are marvellous shots. Francis and Lord Bennington never seemed to miss a thing. Francis may not like shooting, but he got a right and left nearly every time, I noticed. I didn't believe anyone could shoot so accurately." She went to her dressing-table, sat down, and began to attend to her face, making use of cotton wool and silver-topped bottles. "I've made great friends with Lady Bennington. She's perfectly killing. She says absolutely anything that comes into her head. She and Lord Bennington have just won a race and made quite a lot of money, and they're going to the South of France in February. She said why didn't we come out too, and I said it was hopeless, American business

men never could go anywhere. But it would be fun. They are the nicest couple. And she likes you."

"That's good," remarked George, as she paused.

"So did Miss Poynter. In fact you've had quite a success. I'm awfully sorry you didn't come to-day, though. We had lunch in a farmhouse—one of the tenants'—and I never had such heavenly things to eat. Game pies and cold chicken and potted shrimps and little jam tarts, and hot coffee, and lots to drink. I had two glasses of delicious port. Francis was too amusing at lunch. He is so witty. I thought Mrs. Tilling would laugh herself ill. She loved my tweed and wanted to know where I had it made. She has a house in Grosvenor Square, and wants me to come and see her. Francis doesn't like her, but she seems to know everybody. I'm going to lie down till dinner time. I'm too tired to appear again before dinner. What are you going to do?"

"I think I'll go down and see if I can get someone to play a game of billiards," he said, and waited, hoping she would ask what he had done all day, but she was too much occupied with her own thoughts. She passed a comb through her hair, put some cologne on her hands and forehead, and picking up a book went to the bed and lay down, pulling an eiderdown over herself and turning on the reading lamp.

"Oh, how pleasant this is! It isn't so much the walking as the standing that tires you. Francis made me take his shooting-stick, or I'd be more tired still. I must buy one. George, it must be lovely to have a place like this, with shooting and squash and tennis and everything. I always thought I'd like country life if it was this sort. And you could always have a house full of amusing people. Oh, I've got the wrong book. I've read this. Give me that blue one on the table, will you?"

He got up and gave it to her.

"Thanks. Why don't you go down and see if you can find someone for billiards? Captain Northey plays, I know. He is somewhere about."

"I guess I will," George said, and went out, closing the door quietly. Memories of Mullion, the loveliest place he had ever seen, possessed him, with those yew hedges that had helped to lure Mrs. Allgood from the stage; of Professor Allgood with his crutches and his fine head, and his face like a dry-point etching; of Mrs. Allgood in her own home, at her own luncheon table; of her talk, her mind, her personality; of their walk through the woods, and the ivy and deep moss that had ornamented every ditch and bank and stone wall; of Britwell Beeches, that gem of a village on whose skirts Mullion lay; of the astounding fact, which all day he had been longing to impart to Althea, that Mrs. Allgood was Kate Blaine. All these things had failed to find their natural outlet, and now he didn't care if they never found it. He was like a child suddenly disappointed in some pleasure it had set its heart on.

He looked into the library, and found no one there but Sir Bartley Hopkyns, who was reading the *Tatler*, and he dodged out again without being seen. He heard the click of billiard balls, and found Captain Northey and Colonel Accrington already playing. They hailed him and asked him what he had been doing all day, and he told them, briefly. He watched the game for a while, then wandered into the drawing-room.

"I guess I've got nerves," he said to himself, and turned on the gramophone.

If Althea noticed, later, that he was reserved with her and somewhat short in his speech, she gave no sign of it. She saw, with some amusement, how he attached himself to Mrs. Allgood. It was like George, she thought, to pick out the least attractive woman in the party to make friends with. It was so unenterprising of him. Still, she was very thankful that she needn't have him on her mind. Heaven knew when she would have so many uninterrupted hours of Francis's company again, and she meant to make the most of them.

Altogether it was a highly successful visit. Lady Causton had never had a party that went better, and for this Althea was partly responsible. She had that excellent "gift of familiarity" so valuable to the hostess. They promised to come for another visit soon, and motored back to London early Monday morning with hothouse flowers and two brace of limp pheasants.

They were both conscious of that not unpleasant fatigue that comes from tension suddenly relaxed. Althea was sleepy and languid, and George said little. He dropped her at Wilton Crescent and then went to the office, which he reached shortly after eleven. There was an American mail in, and he was soon engrossed in his letters. By the time he got home that night he hardly remembered his grievance, and if he did, was ashamed of it.

After that week-end the time seemed to fly till Christmas, when it paused noticeably over the holidays, and dragged a little. They had a small Christmas tree for Cleve, and George gave Althea a handsome bracelet. She gave him a glass cocktail set and a new kind of cigarette lighter. The night after Christmas, Mary Monash, who had the hardihood to stay in town, gave a dinner-party. Francis was not there. He had gone, dutifully, to Hawfield Place, and later was going to San Moritz for the ski-ing. Althea was a little sad in consequence, and George wondered how much a woman ought to miss a man who was not her husband. He tried to imagine himself depressed because of the absence of some woman other than Althea, and failed. Mrs. Allgood wrote to him once to say that she wasn't coming to London till the end of February, and hoped to see him then.

Althea had not disliked Mrs. Allgood, but she had not particularly liked her. She avoided women who were cleverer than she was, though she cultivated men for that very reason. She took surprisingly little interest in Mrs. Allgood or her house, when George eventually described it to her, or in the fact that she was Kate Blaine.

"Actresses who are *passés*," she remarked, "generally marry some old fogey and live in the country." And she dismissed her from her mind.

George came back from the office one afternoon in February and found Althea in the drawing-room with Mary Monash. The two women were in armchairs on either side of the fire, and were talking in low voices. He was always glad to see Mary, but whenever he came upon two women talking together he felt himself to be in the presence of something acutely feminine and vaguely inimical to him. He said he would go upstairs and change, but Mary cried out:

"No, no! *There's something I want to talk to you about,* and I've got to go in fifteen minutes."

"You arrived at exactly the right moment," Althea said. "Your advice and counsel are urgently required. Ring and we'll have some cocktails."

"The truth is," said Mary, holding up her long and beautiful hand to shield her face from the fire, "I've been trying to persuade Althea to come abroad with me, and now I want to persuade you to let her come."

"Abroad?" George asked, feeling as though he had already consented and wishing he hadn't. "Abroad where?"

"I thought to Cannes for a while," she said. "Then Genoa and Rome, and then perhaps Florence for a few weeks. We might be gone six weeks in all. And if she did come, couldn't you join us somewhere for a fortnight? Do, George. It would be delightful."

"The answer to the last is in the negative, I'm afraid," he answered. "I couldn't. About Althea—that's another matter. But what about leaving Cleve?"

"Oh, my dear George, don't be dramatic and remind me that I'm a mother. I know it. Cleve is in the best possible hands. Nanny is the most conscientious and capable creature in the world. You're here. And if he should show any symptoms of illness naturally I'd come home at once. Do

you realize I've never left Cleve for more than three days since he was born? And you not so long, except that time when I had to come over here with your mother? I think I need a little holiday."

"Don't nip Althea's unselfish impulses in the bud," Mary laughed. "She's consenting to come because I want her to. She brought up all the arguments against it before you came in. It would be lovely for me if she could. We get on surprisingly well, we're both independent, and I've got a very good character; I never quarrelled with anyone in my life. I'm sure it would be a success."

He reflected that this was the first time Mary Monash had ever asked for anything. Most of the favours and benefits —and they had been many—had come from her. If she wanted Althea as her companion—and there were twenty women she might have chosen—it was going to be pretty hard to say no to her. In fact he couldn't say it. Of course Cleve would be all right; why shouldn't he? As for himself —but what was the good of being selfish about it? He got up and walked about the room, then came and stood by the fire facing the two women.

"About six weeks, you say? All right, go ahead. If you want Althea, and she wants to go, that's good enough for me."

Mary sprang up as though she would kiss him, but she only put her arm through his and pressed it.

"George, you really are a lamb. It's too kind of you. I'll take such good care of her. I feel rather a wretch to separate two such fond souls, but I don't think a few weeks apart ever did the fondest any harm."

"When do you want to start?"

"I thought the end of this month or the first of March. That would give Althea plenty of time to buy some clothes, which she says she must do."

"Then you'll be back about the middle of April. Not any later?"

"No later, George, I promise you. Althea's never been to Cannes, and I feel sure it would amuse her for a while. After that I thought we'd improve our minds in Rome and Florence. And if we go to Florence, Francis says he'll join us, which would be delightful. I do wish you could come too."

"Couldn't you possibly, George?" Althea asked.

"No," he answered shortly. He was suffering from a sudden reaction. The mention of Francis's name had changed the whole aspect of the trip for him.

"Well," Mary said, "I'm dining early, and I must be off. Now I can go ahead and make plans. Thank heaven you're the sort of man who says yes or no. I do hate people who only say 'Perhaps' and 'We'll see,' and then when the time comes don't do anything." She gathered up her furs, gloves and purse, kissed Althea, and shook both George's hands with warmth. She told him he was the nicest of God's creatures, and begged him not to come downstairs, as she could let herself out. She was, in fact, too quick for him, and was out of the front door before he was down the stairs. He returned to the drawing-room. For the last few minutes a storm had been brewing in him, stirred up by the feeling that he had been tricked into acquiescence, that the two women had planned this between them, and that Francis's name had purposely been omitted until he had given his consent.

As he came in again Althea said:

"Why on earth are you looking so gloomy? Six weeks isn't anything. You don't really mind, do you?"

With misleading composure he answered:

"Oh, I guess I can bear it. I'll have to, that's all."

"Well, don't make me feel like a criminal. It takes away all the pleasure of it. If you don't want me to go, why didn't you say so when Mary was here?"

He knew he had to say nothing or everything.

He had either to assure her he was glad to have her go, or betray the fact that the whole thing had taken on a new

complexion for him the moment he heard Francis would join them.

"It's all right," he said, without looking at her. "I've said I didn't mind, and I don't."

It all might have ended there, but that Althea was irritated by what she considered the reluctance of his consent.

"Heavens above!" she exclaimed. "Most wives would simply have announced that they were going."

George turned and faced her, and his look had altered.

"Perhaps you'll tell me what most husbands would have done when they heard their wives' admirers were going too."

She stared at him.

"George! What on earth do you mean?"

"Oh, you women are so damned *deep*!" he cried, exasperated. "Why didn't you or Mary *say* straight off that the whole object of the trip was to have Francis Mortlake with you? You pretend it's just you two going alone, and then, when I've consented you spring it on me, and I see the whole thing's a sort of plot. Anyhow, that's what you've made it look like, and I'm damned if I like it. You've been discussing the best way to get round me. You planned and plotted the whole thing. Why couldn't you be straightforward about it? You thought if you said Francis was going I might say no, that's why."

Althea's face seemed to freeze. Her eyes contracted and hardened, and her lips formed themselves into a straight line. She stood at the other end of the fireplace, alert and erect, and there was battle in every line of her body.

"Then you think both Mary Monash and I are a pair of low schemers and intriguers? You suggest that we are plotting and planning to go abroad with a lover or lovers? I'm flattered, George, immensely flattered. After living with me all these years, that's your considered opinion of me? Well, think what you please of me, but kindly leave Mary out of it. A more honourable soul never lived. If you think

I'd stoop to that, well and good, but I'll have you know I'll listen to no abuse of her."

"Abuse! Oh, good Lord, Althea. What are you talking about? Have a little sense. I only said. . . ."

"You said we had plotted and planned the whole thing. That's about as outrageous a statement as even you could make. You evidently think Francis is or will be my lover. Again I'm flattered. If you think this, may I ask why you have never hinted at it before? Why you have accepted favours from him, and welcomed him here again and again, and treated him like a friend? If you've been harbouring these suspicions. . . ."

"Althea shut up! I won't have it. I've harboured no suspicions of you or of Francis. Once you get under way you can turn anything I say into something else. Please be quiet until I've explained."

"Explained!" she scoffed. "You'll have a pretty hard time doing that."

"Please be quiet." They had both lost their tempers now, and both knew it. "I do *not* like the way you have been arranging to go abroad and be met by Francis Mortlake abroad without telling me. You didn't think of it for the first time this afternoon, either, and it's no good saying you did. And I do *not* like the way he wasn't mentioned until I'd said I couldn't go but that you might. That's all I have to complain of, but it's enough. I'm not going to say you can't go, but I don't like it, and I'm not going to pretend I do."

"Are you aware that Mary wants you to come too?"

"She knows darned well I can't drop everything here and go traipsing around Europe."

"Oh! Again you accuse her of cunning. You think she's a rotten sort of woman, just as you think I'm a rotten sort of woman and Francis a rotten sort of man."

"Althea, will you kindly shut up?"

"No, I won't. I know perfectly well what it all comes from. It's that narrow, hateful, Puritanical streak in you that's in

most Americans, and that makes them see evil in everything but what they do themselves. You can't imagine Mary and me going abroad and being joined by a man who is as much your friend as he is mine without suspecting the worst. I think it's absolutely horrible. Horrible! I don't see how you can possibly. . . ."

"Althea, if you say one more word like that I'll turn you over my knee and spank you. I was jealous, if you want to know. I admit it. I am jealous."

"Oh, you admit it? Well, that clears the air a little. Quite apart from the things you have said and hinted about me, will you now kindly apologize for the outrageous things you said against Mary?"

"I didn't say anything against Mary. Anyhow, I never intended to. I like her, and you know it. I think she's a nice woman. But there isn't one of you who won't scheme for what you want."

"You'll take that back too, please. It's an absolute lie. Neither Mary nor I have been guilty of any scheming whatsoever."

"Now look here, Althea. . . .

"I tell you it's a lie. If Mary didn't mention Francis's name till after you'd consented, it was the merest chance, and because she didn't think it particularly important. Why should she? Good heavens, she's known him since they were children. I suppose because Mary and Francis are English you think it follows that they're immoral. You're like Albertine Peters."

"For goodness' sakes, Althea, leave nationalities out of this, and don't make ridiculous statements. I tell you I was simply. . . ."

"You were simply being a hundred per cent American, that's all. You'd shut your eyes to anything and everything that went on in your own country, and suspect evil where it doesn't exist in every other. I'm sick to death of the American mentality and the American point of view. I'm beginning to

be sick of everything American. I suppose you think that because Francis doesn't grind out money all day long or sell something, that he's a waster and a libertine, and that because Mary's grandfather didn't carry bricks or oil an engine or eat pie in his shirtsleeves she's necessarily decadent."

"Althea, for God's sake, what's the good of trying to talk to you when you go on like that? You credit me with ideas I never had in my life, and twist everything I say before I've finished saying it. If you want a quarrel, all right, we've had it, and now let's cut it. I've said you could go, and I'll stick to what I said. Now that's enough."

"It's not enough. If Mary had happened to say in the beginning that Francis was going to join us in Florence, would you have let me go?"

His own feelings in regard to Francis and Althea having now been plainly and nakedly revealed to him, he answered:

"I would have asked you not to."

"You still think, then, that it's a plot? That Mary is allowing me to make use of her in order to further an affair with Francis?"

"No, I do not think that," he almost shouted.

Out of all this welter of words and feelings just one fact remained where it was, and he re-stated it—it was the only safe thing to do when everything else he said was capable of a hundred interpretations in the mind of an angry woman.

"I tell you, Althea, I'm jealous of Francis Mortlake. I've owned up to it, and I repeat it. I'm jealous. I think you like him an awful lot, and I know damn well he's in love with you. Well, how can you expect me to be pleased at the idea of your going away and seeing him all day and every day in Florence, or some such place? It wouldn't be human, and I guess I am human, that's all. Now do what you like about it."

She looked at him icily.

"Very well, then. I'll tell Mary you believe I want to go abroad in order to commit adultery with Francis, and that

therefore I can't go. That's settled. Now I know where I am. And I know precisely and exactly what you think of me. We'll say no more about it. I'm going up to dress."

He cried:

"Althea, I tell you. . . ."

She went swiftly out of the door and closed it. He rushed to it, to follow her, and met Grieves coming in for the cocktail glasses. The sight of her checked him for an instant, and he went up the stairs more slowly. When he reached Althea's door it was locked.

"Althea, let me in. I want to talk to you."

There was no reply. He only heard the opening and shutting of cupboards and drawers, and her brisk footsteps. He wasn't going to be overheard by the servants begging at his wife's door, so he gave it up for the time being and began to change his clothes. Well, he'd gone and done it now. They'd had a quarrel, and a bad one. Their first. And it was about a man. Of course he had blundered. Althea had put him in the wrong in about fifty different ways. What was he going to do now? Her last preposterous assertion that he believed she wanted to go abroad in order to commit adultery with Francis was so outrageous as to be almost funny. Gosh, how women could put things! Then he asked himself:

"Well, if that's entirely untrue, why don't I want her to go? No, I'm damned if it's that. I'm not afraid of her committing anything. Anyhow, that isn't what matters first and foremost. What does matter is that she might get to like Francis Mortlake better than she likes me. That's what I'm afraid of. This adultery business isn't much more than a legal technicality when you come to think of it. What I'm afraid of is that she may get to like him best, and if she does that it'll be plain hell for both of us. Because I don't intend to let her go. I couldn't let her go. I adore her. I'm crazy about her. She's Althea. If she got to like him best it would be awful. Awful! She won't. It's only a sort of thrill

she gets . . . the excitement of novelty. But he is attractive; he's a whole lot more attractive than I am. I guess we might as well admit that. But that's nothing. It doesn't amount to a thing. She loves me all right. Of course she does. Only I suppose I'd better make a generous gesture and tell her she's *got* to go, and apologize. Maybe she won't go now. And nobody likes anyone any better for making them unhappy. If I make her unhappy there'll be hell to pay. And if I let her go, maybe there'll be hell to pay too! Oh, Lord, what had I better do? What a fool I was to say they'd been plotting! Of course they hadn't. But when two women get their heads together they can work anything. How was I to know? I guess I'll have to apologize and make her go, that's all. Francis is all right. There's nothing of the parlour snake about him. Well, he may be all right, but if a woman shows a man that she likes him an awful lot. . . . Yes, but she doesn't. She likes me best. She's got Cleve, and pretty near everything she wants, and I've never stopped loving her for one minute. God, I wish she'd open that door. I could talk to her now. I'll try again."

He put on his dressing-gown and knocked.

"Althea, please, I've got something to say to you."

She answered crisply, "Wait a minute," and ten seconds later she opened the door.

He went straight to her without speaking and put his arms around her and laid his head on her breast. For a moment she stood rigidly erect and tense. Then she relaxed, sighed, murmured "George," and he felt her fingers in his hair.

VIII

FRANCIS CAME up from Hawfield Place, spent a few days in London, then went on to San Moritz. He gave a small dinner-party at his flat before he left, and asked Althea, George, Mary and the Benningtons, who came from Cambridgeshire on purpose for it and put up at a cheap hotel in Bloomsbury for the night. After dinner they went on to the Embassy.

Francis had every intention of meeting Althea and Mary in Florence, and tried to persuade George to join them. George wondered if he couldn't possibly have managed it for two weeks, but even if he could—and he was sure he oughtn't to—it was out of the question for him to go now, since his quarrel with Althea, for it would look as though he were going simply to keep an eye on her. So he merely repeated that he was too busy, and that there was no one he could leave in charge of the office during his absence.

"Then you ought to find someone," Althea said. "It's ridiculous. I've heard any number of men say that success in business is very largely a matter of deputizing and dividing work. If a man is indispensable, as George thinks he is, what's going to happen in the event of his illness, or some accident? And if he isn't indispensable, he ought to be able to leave his work without its collapsing, and go abroad for two weeks with his wife."

"We'll take an extra long holiday in the summer," George told her.

"Anyway, George," Francis said, "I'm not at all sure you'd be amused in Florence. The two girls are bent on sightseeing, and sightseeing in Florence is no laughing matter. There are more pictures, statues, churches, frescoes and other

objects of art to be seen there than in any other one place in the world."

"I'd rather like that for a while."

"George," cried Althea indignantly, "when you know perfectly well I can't even drag you to the National Gallery!"

"Well, I know, but that's different. There are always so many other things to do in London or New York."

"I haven't been to Florence for fifteen years," Francis said. "I want to see the old brown Arno again, and look up one or two old friends, and hear the latest gossip—think of the gossip that must have passed from mouth to mouth there in fifteen years! Enough to make about ten Sagas. And I want to go to Siena and San Gimignano, and gaze sentimentally at the view from Fiesole at sunset."

"What a fool I was to make that row," George was thinking. "Everything's all right." He got up to dance with Clodagh Bennington, while Mary danced with Lord Bennington, and Francis and Althea sat and talked. "All the same, they've got an awful lot in common, and he's English, and she's in love with everything English."

The Benningtons weren't going abroad after all, as they had now lost all the money they had won a few weeks earlier. They asked George to come and stay with them in their modern brick villa and go to Newmarket while Althea was away, and he said he would. He warned them that he knew nothing about horses and less about racing.

"Too bad," Lord Bennington said. "I think you'd have liked racing. I think you'd have liked hunting, too. He's got the look of a huntin' feller, hasn't he, Clodagh? Try it one of these days, George."

George said it was too late now, that he'd never ridden in his youth. It was amazing the number of things these people expected him to do besides build up a business—and play golf. They expected him to ride, to be knowledgeable about horses and racing, to shoot, to read books, to know something about pictures and art in general, to play tennis.

Where did they get the time for it or expect him to get it? Bennington, he supposed, had once been a man of leisure, but nowadays he worked in a busy stockbroker's office, and came to London five days a week. It was his wife who looked after the racing.

"I like reading the hunting notes in the paper sometimes," he told them. "There was one in *The Times* the other day. Part of it was like this: 'From Tapperton the bitches raced a fox with the wind on his cheek to Broomhill.' I liked 'with the wind on his cheek'."

Shortly after midnight, Francis leaned forward and whispered something to Mary. She said, her expression changing, "Oh, then I'll go quietly out." He explained to the others, who saw there was something wrong, that Monash had just come in with his lady, and he didn't want Mary to stay, nor did she want to stay, so he was taking her home. Her face had taken on the look of a woman who tries to hide a piercing pain.

George looked covertly and with great interest at the newcomers, as the women gathered up their wraps and purses and Francis paid the bill, for none of them wished to stay if he and Mary went. He saw a handsome man with a look of breeding and intelligence glazed over with self-indulgence. He took, from his expression, a fatuous pride in his companion. She was magnificently dressed, and was a *demi-mondaine* of international fame. She might easily have passed for a Duchess among the uninstructed and wore a look of bored aloofness, as though to be seen at a night-club, even the smartest, was somewhat cheapening. She was the type of woman, George supposed, toward whom a rich waster like Monash would inevitably gravitate.

"Francis is so sweet to Mary," Althea said, as they drove home after leaving the Benningtons at their hotel. "He's like a brother to her."

"You'd think any man would be good to her. Why doesn't she divorce Monash?"

"She's a Catholic. I thought you knew that."

"I did know it. But if my religion kept me from being reasonably and legitimately happy, I'd darn well change it. She'd most likely marry someone else if she were free."

"I don't know. Poor Mary. She adores him, even yet."

"If he'd been good to her," George remarked, "she'd probably have been bored stiff with him by now."

"That type of remark doesn't suit you, my dear George. And it doesn't happen to be true. He's the love of her life. There are women like that."

"Well, it's a rare breed."

"A very good thing too," retorted Althea. "Look what it's done to Mary."

The two women left London the first of March, and George went to Victoria to see them off. Mary had been lent a villa in Florence for part of March and April, but she had promised to bring Althea back in six weeks, and she was determined not to stay a day longer.

"Oh, well, look here . . ." said George. "If you're enjoying it and Althea wants to stay. . . ."

"We'll see," replied Althea.

He had brought them each some flowers; violets for Mary, and for Althea some yellowish orchids to wear on her fur coat. She kissed him affectionately, with a twinge of remorse at leaving him.

"Good-bye, dear old George. Grieves will look after everything, and Mrs. Thompson knows exactly what you like to eat, so I don't feel you're going to suffer. I'll write every few days. You'll wire me if Cleve isn't well, of course, but he's never looked better, and I'm not going to worry."

Mary gave him her cheek to kiss.

"Good-bye, dear, *kind* George. I do so appreciate your letting me have Althea. I'll take good care of her, bless you! Don't work too hard."

He watched the train out of sight, and then returned to the office. He was now a bachelor in London for the first

time in his life, and the prospect afforded him no more delight than the prospect of being a bachelor in New York had done. He supposed he had been a bachelor so thoroughly in his youth that by the time he married there was little charm left in that rather tiresomely untrammelled state. He had been an enthusiastic sower of wild oats, and by the time he met Althea had profited by the harvests of several years. There are men to whom the gay life is never attractive—they are rare—those to whom it never ceases to be attractive, and those who, like George, have tested it thoroughly and got bored with it. No, those early raptures were uncapturable now, and he knew it. He might go out once in a while with Harry Sullivan and have a late night, but that was chiefly for the amusement he got out of watching and listening to Harry Sullivan. He'd probably go to a few small parties in Althea's absence, but most evenings he thought he'd stay at home and read.

Mrs. Allgood had sent him Spengler's *Decline of the West*, and he was already deep in it. It had begun by giving him some severe shocks. He had been in the habit of thinking that the Western civilisation was the only one worth mentioning, that it had been steadily growing and improving since the first century—the dawn of the only world that mattered, the modern world—and that it would go on improving, with America leading the way, indefinitely, or until it reached Utopia, the millennium.

He believed that Cleve's great-great-grand-children would be skimming and darting here and there in foolproof aeroplanes—he pictured them as small affairs, with multicoloured wings—over an ideally beautiful countryside entirely devoid of ugliness or tin cans. Everyone would be happy and rich, and would only have to work six hours a day—though sensible people like himself would work eight. America, which would be the first to discover the key to all these joys, would be the admired and envied of all the world. He saw her like a great, proud mother, with the puzzled little countries of

Europe clustered about her knees while she taught them how to live. It was like one of those plaster groups one sees at Exhibition Fairs.

Such was George's dream of the future. The voice of Spengler cut through it like an alarm clock cutting through a morning sleep. Western civilization, whether in Germany or America, was all one to Spengler, and it was on the down-grade. Alarmed and fascinated, George followed the workings of his curious mind through the four hundred closely printed pages, and felt, at the end of it, that he would never be the same man again. A thousand candles seemed to have been lighted in his brain. He longed to talk it over with Mrs. Allgood. He wrote to her, asking her when she was coming to take that flat, and her reply was posted in London.

"My dear George Goodall," she wrote,

"I'm glad to hear you liked that very square meal I sent you in the shape of a book. I'm in London, in my sister-in-law's small flat in Westminster. Do you think I could persuade you both to come and dine one night? If you think your wife would care to, send me a line, and I'll write and ask her. I'll get a fourth and we'll talk. My husband is safely in Pau—how ambiguous this sounds! I mean he arrived there safely—and I am a Londoner for two months. I was starving for London.

"Yours very sincerely,

"Kate Allgood."

George's heart warmed to her. How opportunely she had come! What sane and comfortable joys her coming promised! He rang her up that night and told her of his single state.

"Oh, well," she cried. "Then come to-morrow night and we'll dine by ourselves."

He found her in a small flat in a small new building between two old houses in Westminster. She had made the place look attractive by a pleasing arrangement of flowers and

lamps, but he could see that her sister-in-law's taste was not wholly in accord with her own, and he remembered the loveliness of Mullion as a background for her with regret.

"How nice to see you," she said, adding with a laugh, "and how nice to see you alone! I would have been charmed if your wife could have come, but I'm even more charmed to see you again like this—only, poor soul, you must miss her terribly."

"I do," he admitted. "It's all right in the daytime, at the office, but when I get home . . .! Well, I guess I'll have gotten used to it a little by next week."

"She went with Mary Monash, you said."

"Yes. They're in Cannes now, having a fine time, and the idea is that later on they go to Florence and meet Francis there."

"Francis in Florence. How lovely! I like Florence so much better than Venice. Venice is too exacting. A Frenchman of my acquaintance calls it the city of *l'amour obligatoire*. Personally I always feel there as though the spirits of all its departed had presented me with an album and asked me to write some appropriate sentiment therein. But what a lucky woman to be going in such good company!"

George was not as yet disposed to tell her of his feelings about the trip, although he suspected that he one day would. It struck him as curious that out of all the women at Whittleworth Mrs. Allgood was the one he liked best, and the one Althea had liked least. When, where, had this divergence in tastes begun? At home they had always liked the same people. . . .

Mrs. Allgood was in black. The modelling of her fine arms was unspoilt by the years. They were firm yet flexible arms, and she used them a good deal in talking in a quite untheatrical but un-English way. Eyes, arms, ankles, George thought, those were the things to look for in a woman. They outlived all the rest. But Mrs. Allgood was still in her riper, fuller youth. She suggested nothing so ephemeral as

time. She suggested mellowness and completion. He had known little until now of the charms of forty-eight. He was to know more.

She had brought one of her servants from Mullion with her, was most comfortably installed, and looked forward to her solitude. She said she didn't mean to see very many people.

"London! How I long for this time each year! I passionately love the country and all that it means, but I'm urban, urban. Let it rain, let it fog, let it freeze, it's all one to me here. There are picture-galleries, libraries, book-shops, theatres—theatres, Mr. Goodall, where I see women acting as though they'd never been on a stage before; the men are better—to say nothing of restaurants where I have the fun of choosing my table, my company and my claret. I hope to see you often. I sometimes bore women—I know I do, I feel it—but I never bore men. I bore women because I'd rather talk about things and ideas than about people. But I don't really mind boring a woman now and again. They've bored me so often."

George thanked her for sending him *The Decline of the West*, and said that he couldn't get it out of his mind.

"I feel as though there had been a hurricane inside my head," he said. "You know the way a hurricane sucks up everything in its path and carries things for miles. Everything that was in my head before seems to have been blown clean out, and a whole lot of strange things have been sucked in. Just take what he says about art and literature alone—why, he made me see them in a new light. He puts them on a par with mathematics. He makes the study of them a man's job. . . ."

"Alas!" mourned Mrs. Allgood, "it has never yet been a woman's job."

"Well, I always used to think a man could leave all that to the women. And he makes me wonder if he isn't right about our civilization."

She said, "Other civilizations have consumed themselves and died. Why not ours? Everything else dies—or undergoes a change. Why shouldn't they? Does the thought depress you?"

He said it did.

"I liked the idea that we were handing on something, like a lighted torch."

"At least let's hope we'll hand on a warning."

"Oh, well, whatever the next civilization is, it's sure to be better," George said. "The world's bound to improve."

"Good men are usually optimists," she observed. "I wonder why that is?"

"Then you don't believe in progress?" he asked, ignoring her accusation of virtue.

"I don't know. I have fifty theories about life and time. I've learnt to distrust time utterly. I think it's a cunning hoax. And without time, one can't very well believe in progress, or what we call progress. I incline to the theory that everything in the universe, everything that is and has been and will be, is co-existing in space, and it's only as we run our eyes over a tiny portion of it that we get the illusion of movement."

"Good Lord!" said George.

"Yes. Some more claret for Mr. Goodall, Bettson. I'll lend you a book by a Russian philosopher that I think the most engaging philosophical work in the world. I got so excited reading it the first time that William repeatedly took it away from me. Whenever I want a mental stimulant I read it again. William, having a really scientific mind, never gets excited over anything, nor does he believe in anything except the speed of a ray of light. I like the more sensational theories about the universe, myself. They excite me."

"Well," George said, "I never got any further than the *Origin of Species*."

"You were lucky to get that far. You might have been born in Tennessee. Personally the origin of species interests

me very little. I don't care so much what man is as what the universe is, though it's quite amusing to speculate how we got here. Do you ever wonder how those little mites get into cheese?"

"I don't think I ever wondered particularly."

"Oh, I do. There you see a perfectly good bit of Cheddar." She held it up on her fork. "Now if I keep it long enough, an interesting little creature called, I believe, Tyroglyphus Something or other, will be discovered in large numbers therein. How did it get there? Not from the outside. It's a parasite, and a symptom of decay. Well, it seems to me quite possible that we, and all other forms of life here, are a symptom of decay too, and made our appearance in the same way. What fun if we should prove to be mere parasites upon the body of some vast decaying organism! Something that's been kept too long."

"Fun!" said George. "If you call that fun. . . ."

"Well, it's fun to imagine. Have some cheese?"

"No, thanks. Not after that. Do you spend a lot of time reading this sort of stuff . . . philosophy and science?"

She explained that she only read them in her lighter moments.

"I frolic with Ouspensky and Lodge, and people who explain Einstein, and then I turn my serious attention to the business of worrying about William and housekeeping, and clothes. Those things really weary and tax the brain. The other is an excitement, a stimulant. I take philosophy as some people take whisky or drugs. I've got quite drunk on theories about the space-time continuum."

"I've suddenly discovered that I don't know what I think," George said. "All the ideas I had before I'd just borrowed ready-made from some other moron."

"Scepticism," said Mrs. Allgood, "is the beginning of all wisdom. I love a good sceptic. The people who irritated me most in your country when I was there—no doubt they're all dead now—were the people who thought you a cynic if

you didn't believe in harps in heaven and affinities on earth."

"I wonder what you were like at twenty?" George said suddenly, a little surprised at his own question. The maid had placed fruit and port on the table, and they were alone.

"Do you mean in appearance? I have hundreds of photographs."

"No, I don't mean in appearance."

"Now that's a question a woman loves to be asked. Let me see if I can tell you. I was a very earnest young woman, I think, and in love with my profession. I took my art very seriously. I didn't know then that it wasn't an art at all, but a kind of craft. All the same, I loved it. Oddly enough, men mattered to me very little in those days. Only my work mattered, and myself. I was hideously egoistic, and I was the despair of a good many frustrated males. But after thirty I changed. I loved men. I was insatiable. I wanted them to talk to me and listen to me by the hour, and I had some terrific love affairs."

"Lovers?" George wondered, but he didn't ask. He preferred to guess.

"But somehow they were always disappointing, though I don't regret them. I was in love with a married man—not an actor, I never loved an actor—when I met William. He had a nice wife and several children, so I ended it as best I could, and I was suffering as a man suffers whose leg is roughly amputated, when William began his pursuit of me. William at the stage door—well, you've seen him, so I needn't tell you what an odd sight that was. It touched me in the strangest way. He always hated the theatre. He said acting was a bastard art—it's been said before and since—and he disliked actors and actresses. I think it was partly to remove him from a *milieu* he so heartily detested that I married him."

She was silent for a moment, then she raised her fine arms above her head, sighed, and said, "How thankful I

am that I did!" and got up from the table. He followed her into the small sitting-room, where they had liqueurs and coffee. He took pleasure in watching her sure and purposeful movements, her intent and lively face. She inspired him with confidence; in herself, in him, in almost everything. The fire fluttered pleasantly in the grate. Outside a cold rain was being driven along the streets, that shone and reflected like canals, but inside it was warm, and the light complimentary and soft, and Mrs. Allgood talked—"The older I get," she said, "the more I like talking, and the less I can resist the impulse"—and George talked too, as he had never talked before in his life.

Would he like to come again on Thursday? He certainly would. Then she'd ask some nice couple. Oh, he begged, couldn't they just have another evening like that one, by themselves? Or they might go to a play, she suggested.

"No, let's do this again. If we go to a play we'll have to hurry through dinner and rush off. I don't know when I've enjoyed an evening as much as this. And Saturday night you know you promised to come out with me somewhere."

When he had gone, Mrs. Allgood sat down and wrote a letter to her husband. She felt in the mood for writing.

"George Goodall has just been here. He dined with me alone, as his wife's away. I think he enjoyed every minute of it, which is most flattering to me, William, when you consider my years. (As a matter of fact, I wonder if I'm not more attractive now, in some ways, than I ever was before?) He really is the most likeable soul, and I plainly see that I'm going to be very fond of him. His mind is somewhat untilled, and I've been doing some rather ruthless digging. But it's a charming mind, and both humorous and sane. I feel he wants stirring up, so I showed off a little to-night, as I sometimes do when you're not about, and now I'm feeling a little ashamed of myself. He took home a book on the old Italian masters, which struck me as wistful and pathetic. He evidently means to follow his wife step by

step through the galleries of Florence, where she is soon to be. He's too busy to go abroad himself. I told you I thought her a hard, cold little thing, but extremely attractive, and so far I haven't had cause to change my opinion. But enough of this gossip.

"Give my love to Emmaline. I know she's always perfectly happy in Pau, with you, bless her heart. There are times, William, as you know, when I overflow with love for all us poor creatures here, and on these occasions—to-night is one of them—I feel I could die for Emmaline, or live with her, or do anything for her, and the fact that she doesn't like me, and never has and never will, doesn't matter a jot. Yes; to-night I love the whole pathetic, ridiculous world. And you, my darling, most of all and more than ever."

IX

ALTHEA SENT George a stream of postcards. She sent them from Cannes, from Monte Carlo, from Grasse, from the restaurant under the high bridge at the Gorge de Loup. She usually wrote on them, "I *do* wish you were here." It was true: she did wish it quite frequently. She felt that George was missing a great deal, above all the chance of seeing for himself the endless attractions and joys of Europe. The charm of "foreign-ness" appealed to her irresistibly, and she thought that one of the chief advantages of England as a place of residence was its convenience as a jumping-off place for every foreign part. She wanted George to see for himself—he couldn't, alas! imagine it—the varied and amusing world that lay at London's very threshold.

"America is so terribly far away from everything," she complained to Mary.

"But it seems to me almost everything's there," Mary once answered. She had a firm belief that America was a sort of self-contained Paradise. She often wondered at Althea's delight in the things that were such an old story to her, and thought that America must contain within its own vast boundaries everything reason could desire.

"I'm certain I could be happy there," she insisted.

"Well, I just wish you'd try it, my dear," Althea answered. "I'd give a lot to see you trying to live in the way you're used to living, and on the same income, in New York. I'd laugh myself to death."

Mary had a little house full of old panelling in a little street near St. James's Palace. She had a perfect cook who had been with her father in Berkshire for twenty years, and an admirable manservant. Her house ran so smoothly that

she was hardly conscious it ran at all. She was one of those unfortunate women who have one great sorrow which dwarfs every other possible sorrow into insignificance. She thought money troubles—she had never had them—unimportant. She thought all troubles unimportant but the kind she herself had to endure.

"If a woman is tolerably happy with her husband and is loved, nothing else matters," she said.

"Everything else matters," Althea returned with conviction.

She sent more postcards from Rome. She had been there years before with her rather belligerently virtuous and irritable father, but she now saw it in a very different light. She was sentimental enough to make inquiries about her old Italian admirer, and learnt that he had been killed on the Trentino. She couldn't help reflecting that but for her father's interference she might possibly have been the Marchesa di Montesanto, romantically widowed. Mary had a friend at the British Embassy who squired them here and there, but they were tired of staying in hotels, and as soon as the villa was ready for them they went on to Florence. This happened on the first day of April, a day Althea recorded in her diary—while abroad she kept a diary—with the comment, "I hope this isn't an omen!"

They arrived late in the afternoon, and for the first time saw the magical blue dusk of Tuscany that seems full of incense and gauzy floating veils. A virile taxi took them and their luggage through the incredibly narrow and crowded streets of the town by a system of dartings, dashings, abrupt stoppings, breathless turnings and furious hootings, and once out of the town their progress was fantastic and birdlike.

"Francis wouldn't care for this," Althea said, as she and Mary were thrown together at a sharp, upward curve. Looking back, she saw the lights of Florence huddled together, like topazes lying in a blue velvet lap.

Mary, inhaling the air that blew in through the open window, said:

"Blossoms! Wistaria! I can smell them. Oh, isn't it lovely to be here?"

"I could cry with joy," Althea answered. "I can hardly believe my own luck sometimes."

The villa belonged to an Englishwoman married to an Italian of advanced years. She wrote feverish novels about Roman and Florentine society, and lived at the villa while she worked, as she considered Florence a better *milieu* for literary work than Rome.

It was discovered at length behind high iron gates set in a high wall in a lane more than half-way up to Fiesole. A man in a striped apron opened to them, and introduced himself as Dante. They saw in the fading light a white house with green shutters surrounded by ilex trees and little cypresses, and through the wide-open front door they could see into a small, bright hall hung with tapestries. Althea spoke no Italian, Mary very little, but they expressed their satisfaction with smiling faces and exclamations of pleasure. While their things were being taken upstairs, they stood reading the letters that were waiting for them on the hall table. There was one for Mary from Francis, and one for Althea from Francis, as well as one from George. She stood reading them in a happy glow. "Poor old George! . . . How he does adore me!" she thought . . . and a love-letter from Francis; at least it could hardly be called anything else. Mary read hers aloud. It was from Milan.

"DEAR MARY,

"I'll be with you April 2nd, about four. The train gets in at three-thirty, I believe. I stopped off here to look at the pictures. They're good, of course, but what a city! It's pandemonium. I didn't sleep a wink last night. I'm looking forward enormously to being with you in Florence. I pray we have good weather.

"Always affectionately,

"FRANCIS."

Althea said that hers was from Milan too, and contained much the same news. She put it away in her purse with George's, and said:

"Now let's see the house."

They went from room to room with little cries of delight. Mary thanked heaven, she said, that her friend's lack of restraint and faults of taste were confined to her books, and entirely absent from her house. There was nothing wrong, nothing disappointing. The living-rooms were charming, the bedrooms perfect, Mary's, Althea's, Francis's, all in a row and all overlooking the terrace at the back, with its grape-arbours and its half-acre of skilfully planned garden, where a fountain played into an oblong pool surrounded by lemon trees and small cypresses. Below and beyond were the lights of Florence. Althea leaned on her window-sill, her heart overflowing with satisfaction and deep content. A bird sang . . . surely, surely that was a nightingale! She had heard them in England, in the summer. She called out to Mary in the next room:

"Mary, listen to that bird. Isn't it a nightingale? It sounds like one all right."

Mary, after listening for a moment, called back:

"Yes, it's a nightingale. They begin early here."

It was singing in those dark trees—ilex trees Mary had said they were. How lovely! And Francis was coming to-morrow . . . to-morrow, only a few hours from now. It was almost too much bliss.

In the morning she woke late, tired with the journey and the sightseeing in Rome. She could hear the pleasant whine of a woodcutting machine beyond the garden wall, and smell the smoke of newly-lighted house fires. She rang the bell for her breakfast tray. Francis was coming to-day . . . and what a day! She watched the sun mount higher in a flawless sky as she ate her breakfast of coffee, fresh rolls and butter, and honey. She would have at least two weeks of this. Two whole weeks. She was loved. The most desirable

man she had ever met was enslaved by her, and she would have opportunities for charming and enslaving him still more. She thought she would like to have been one of those ladies of Provençe in the tenth and eleventh centuries, with their worshipping troubadour poets and their homage-paying knights. What an exquisite existence for a beautiful woman!

She wanted all the warm and comfortable joys of being loved, of being sought, of being desired, without the pains and risks of loving. She meant always to stop short of love herself. Women ought to be takers, not givers. The more you take the more you get, that ought to be every woman's motto. That wasn't cynical. That was just plain fact. She pitied poor Mary. Her husband cared nothing for her. Her dearest friend wrote her a short, dry letter, as though she were his sister. . . . She presently had an embarrassing few minutes with Angelina, the maid, who wished to know if she would like her bath before the other signora had hers, or after. She seized upon the word *"bagno,"* and nodded and said, *"si, si, si,"* again and again, but this seemed not to satify Angelina, who presently burst into a fit of laughter and had to run out of the room, returning presently with Mary, in her dressing-gown, and between the three of them the thing was settled satisfactorily.

They rested that first morning, sitting in the sun on the terrace. Mary lay in a long, cane chair, looking fragile, as though she were exhausted, but she roused herself after lunch and sent for a taxi, and when it came she went down to meet Francis. Althea decided that she wanted him to see her first on that terrace but as the sun declined it grew chilly, and after nearly an hour of decorative waiting, she was driven indoors for warmth.

One of the most satisfactory things about Francis was his spontaneous way of expressing his pleasure. He was happy to be there, and said it and showed it. He was as delighted with the house as they were. He was even more

delighted to be there with them. He approved of everything.

"What news of George?" he asked Althea. "I went back to England after San Moritz to see my mother, who was ill, but I was only in London a day, and didn't see anybody. Is he coming?"

"Oh, no. He couldn't get away. I was pretty sure he wouldn't come. We tried to persuade him, didn't we, Mary?"

Mary said George had a well-developed sense of duty.

"Oh, I like calling a spade a spade," exclaimed Althea. "What kept George from coming was an over-developed sense of salesmanship, bless his heart. Let's be honest about it."

"American husbands appear paragons of unselfishness to everyone except their wives," Francis remarked. "However, I've no objection to being the only Adam here, so, much as I like George, I shall not spend my days repining. How do you manage to talk to the servants?"

"We don't," Mary said. "We're leaving that to you."

Francis spoke Italian, with a somewhat pompous precision, taking an obvious satisfaction in its superb vowels, and at Mary's request he made all necessary arrangements with the three who made up the household staff, with considerable amusement on both sides.

Althea, nervous and highly strung, felt that his coming had turned a key in her being, tightening all her nerve centres and increasing their tension. She felt charged with electricity and magnetism. Consciously and unconsciously she used every charm and every faculty to draw him to her, but so subtly that only he was aware of it. She managed to establish, as skilful women can, a kind of current between them, a subterranean stream that flowed darkly and invisibly.

The vast brown gloom of the Duomo was the stage, the next day, for their first clear and acknowledging looks of

more than friendliness, of more than ordinary interest. Althea, gazing upwards at the great dome at Francis's side, lowered her eyes, full of wonder, to his. And suddenly they were staring at one another, wide-eyed and silent. Mary's footsteps and the footsteps of other sightseers seemed leagues away, across that immense floor. Their eyes held for whole seconds, wavered, and then parted. But outside once more in the brilliant white light of the Piazza, she thought of that look again and again. Something had taken place, a little milestone had been reached and passed, and their eyes would never again meet without something of that look in them and some memory of the emotions that had accompanied it. Love, out of such moments, makes himself a fine horse to ride upon, and springs into the saddle. To Althea, love, until now, had gone ploddingly on foot. The fiery rider with spurs she knew nothing of, and, knowing nothing, she feared nothing.

They found it advisable to hire a car for the duration of their stay, and to the chauffeur Francis talked plainly. He was very delicate, he said, he had a weak heart, "*la malattia di cuore*," and the slightest danger or accident might cause it to stop beating for ever. Therefore a speed of more than so many *miglia* per hour might easily prove fatal.

"It's funny," Althea said, "that you're so fond of slow and stately motion in a car, when your favourite pastimes are ski-ing and ski-jumping."

"Oh, my dear," Mary answered for him, "Francis is made up of pleasing contradictions. Never look for consistency in him. Constancy perhaps, consistency never."

Spring had come early to Florence that year. Wistaria foamed in odorous waves over arbour and wall, Judas trees held up their brilliant magenta blossoms against a sapphire sky, purple and white and yellow irises marched among their green swords along garden paths, the fruit trees shook down their blossoms upon emerald grass, and in the endless vineyards, in the plains and on the steep hillsides, the grape-

vines joined hands as in some grave, ceremonial dance, and held up twisted, imploring arms to receive their garlands of new leaves.

Althea was all but bewildered by the onrush of new impressions. Leaving the seductions of the countryside out of it—and they couldn't, any more than they could leave Siena and San Gimignano out of it—there were still the galleries, the Bargello, the streets, the people, the endless churches, the palazzos. It was too much, too rich and lavish to enjoy fully in two short weeks. And there was Francis. . . . He now filled, and alone, the whole foreground of her mind. Her thoughts were busy with him constantly. Whatever she saw, she wanted to see through his eyes, or wanted him to see through hers. The Judas trees were living and wonderful because he saw them too, the Benozzo Gozzoli frescoes were an unforgettable experience because she saw them at his side. George's frequent and loving letters seemed to come from another and dimmer world, and their messages hardly printed themselves on her brain before they faded again.

To rest their eyes and minds, they motored to Vallombrosa and picnicked there high up on a sunny hillside among the climbing woods, unleafed as yet, of chestnut, mixed with pine. They found the lovely blue scilla, the honey-scented daphne, the pale crocus, and here and there the tops of the young poplars showed a golden nimbus of tiny unfolding leaves against the sun.

Mary, in one of her silent and introspective moods, wandered away after lunch, following a path through the woods and turning once to wave a hand in farewell. She was like a young girl thwarted in love, Althea mused, to whom beautiful and romantic scenery is at the same time a delight and an agony. But her thoughts soon flew back to herself. It was the first time she had been alone with Francis in such a place, and her good fortune—and his—seemed to her miraculous. She lay stretched out on a rug in the sun, resting her head

on her elbow, and the lines of her charming body were as pleasing to the eye as the lines of the hills sloping down toward the plain. Francis was sitting with his hat tilted over his eyes, smoking and looking at her, and wondering at the ease with which women disposed themselves upon the ground, while he found sitting or lying equally uncomfortable.

"It's odd," he said, "how one's wishes are sometimes fulfilled without the slightest effort on one's own part. Years ago when I was in Florence I came here alone, and it turned out to be one of those significant days all the details of which—for some obscure reason—stamp themselves on the memory. You've had days like that, I expect. Everyone has. As I look back, I see it as one of the little milestones in my life, and it's as clear as possible. One of the things I remember best was wishing I wasn't here alone—and naturally it was a female companion I wished for. I told myself I'd come back some day, and under the right conditions. The place fascinated me. It's partly the name, I think, which suggests both Valhalla and ambrosia. And chestnut groves have an even more classic beauty, to me, than olive groves. Well, when I first saw you in Biarritz last summer, my mind did a very curious thing. It jumped back to that day here when I was twenty, and it set you in the empty place. It was an odd trick for it to play. What the association of ideas was, I can't imagine, for there's nothing classic about you. And now here you actually are, in the flesh. And I've done nothing whatever to bring it about."

Althea said nothing. She preferred to be silent. The moment suddenly became heavy with significance, with portent. If that day fifteen years ago had been a milestone for him, this day would be one for her.

"The things that come without effort on our part," he went on, "I always think of as destiny. Things we get by working and by managing I look on as causality. The two types of event seem to me quite distinct and separate and oughtn't to be confused. The first come trailing clouds of

glory. The second are more like receipted bills. I'm extremely grateful for this charming bit of destiny."

She was still silent. She loved listening to his voice. She wanted him to go on and on, to further revelations, to further indiscretions. He reached for her hand and took it, and her fingers closed responsively round his.

"Silence becomes you very well," he said, "particularly when I say things I shouldn't say, which I've hardly begun to do yet. Don't utter a word. Go on looking at the view and let me look at you. You have a delightful way of replying. Your nostrils quiver very, very slightly, and your eyes widen. You're a skilful creature, Althea. I wish I could forget George among his office furniture."

She turned her head toward him.

"Since you've made me think of George," she said, "what about him? He could have come. By staying in London he thought he might sell a few more desks."

"If you're unfair to George," said Francis, raising her hand to his face and kissing it, "I shall have to take his side, and I don't want to do that, heaven knows."

It was the first time any sort of caress had passed between them, and perhaps because of their previous restraint, and their careful avoidance of even the lightest demonstrations, nothing that she had ever experienced had been able to stir her as deeply as the touch of his lips on her palm.

"You know precisely how I feel about George," she said, her voice controlled and steady, "so we needn't go into that."

"I think I do know. That's where the danger lies. Shall I proceed to act on that knowledge, or shall I not?"

"You'd better not, my dear Francis," she said, crisply, for she was on the defensive now, "I'm quite capable of being bored by two men at the same time."

He laughed at this.

"A rough one for me, and a rougher one for George."

She took away her hand and sat up.

"Francis, listen. When I say I'm bored with George, I don't want you to misunderstand me. I mean I'm bored with what he stands for. There are times when the mere mention of the words 'sales' and 'salesmanship' makes me want to scream. You know what a darling George is. I *am* fond of him, but his point of view drives me nearly crazy. He's so complacent, he's always so sure he's right, he's so one hundred per cent American. The way he yearns for the *Saturday Evening Post* every Friday, the importance he gives to every word he reads in the American papers, the way he talks about the President as if he were talking about God—all those things irritate me nearly to death." She broke off. "I know I'm a devil to say this."

Francis had listened to the outbursts of more than one highly-strung wife.

"My dear Althea, it's matrimony you're kicking against, not George. You'd better face it."

"It isn't. I'm much too conventional to kick against matrimony. I like marriage. I think married life is the only life for a woman. The only life for me, anyway. But if George was only . . . if he would only. . . ."

"Yes, I know," broke in Francis. "Poor old George! How does he amuse himself while you're away? Does he go anywhere?"

"Oh, yes, he's been dining out quite a lot."

"Does he say anything in his letters about Mrs. Allgood? He seemed to get on very well with her."

"Yes. He's been seeing her several times a week, I'm thankful to say."

"She's an attractive woman. I wouldn't be too thankful."

"A nice, comfortable soul, I should think."

"How badly women judge other women, on the whole. I've often noticed it."

"Isn't she a nice, comfortable soul?"

"She's a very attractive woman with a lot of vitality and an active mind. She's got the most masculine brain with the

most feminine make-up I've ever come across, and I like it."

"I prefer a feminine brain with a feminine make-up."

"I like that too," he agreed; "but the other attracts me as well. I've always thought I would have adored George Sand."

"Perhaps you would. Then do you adore Mrs. Allgood?"

"No. We haven't crossed each other's paths enough for that. But I like her."

"I believe," she said, with the faintest hint of displeasure in her voice, "that you're one of those men who could love any woman provided her charms were above a certain level."

"Certainly I could," he said, "given all the right circumstances. So could any reasonable man. Let me tell you this. The man who makes a good lover is the man who loves women first and a woman afterwards. Every woman should learn this vital fact and never forget it. You want a man to be indifferent to women and yet be able to love and understand one woman. It can't be done my dear Althea, outside of romantic novels. From the general to the particular is the rule in love. You can't hate men and love a man. To know how to love one woman you must love all women, or the idea of woman, which is the same thing. Women, I know, want to be exceptions, but it's utterly unsound and absurd. There's only a small demand for the exceptional and the market is hard to find."

"Francis," she protested, not caring much for the turn the conversation had taken, "why argue with me about the relations of the sexes here on Vallombrosa?"

"To keep myself from indiscretions. I thought of George in Lombard Street. Whenever I start an argument with you, my dear, you may be sure it's because I want to kiss you. When I start arguments with other people it's generally because I want to kick them. Let me hasten to say that there are far more people I want to kick than there are people I

want to kiss. In fact the first class increases every year, and the second is in danger of being narrowed down to one."

"That, I feel, is as it should be," she said patting her thick, short hair into place with both hands.

"Althea, you're a challenging and dangerous little devil. I'm not going to kiss you, all the same. Small pebbles have been known to start great landslides. When are you going to let your hair grow?"

"Never. I like it as it is."

"Strange creatures! Your fashions seem to be traps with which to catch or trip up one another. If you wanted wholeheartedly to catch men you'd never change yourselves. You'd outline your waists and hips and leave your hair long. This so far tolerably discreet *tête-à-tête* is over. I see Mary returning to us."

"Did you persuade her to leave her hair long?"

"She needed no persuading. The lady who enslaved Dick Monash wears hers short, and that was enough for Mary."

"Do you think he'll ever go back to her?"

"Monash? Never. Such an offence against love is never forgiven by the offender."

"I do hate to see her so unhappy."

"She's not altogether unhappy. She couldn't be and keep her looks so well. Or perhaps one great sorrow preserves a woman's beauty better than a multitude of small anxieties."

They started back before the sun got too low, and descended the steep, twisting road with admirable restraint. Before they reached Florence it was dark and cold, and the stars were out. Francis sat between the two women, and for the last few miles they drove in silence. Althea thought of that half-hour alone with him on the hillside, and wished she could be as close to him in mind as she was then and now in body. She longed to be able to touch his remote and unknown spirit as easily as she could touch the shoulder of his coat in the dark with her cheek.

She had never before felt this yearning tenderness, this yearning desire for mental—even more than for physical—contact with a man. She had imagined that the act of falling romantically in love was very like tumbling headlong over a cliff or precipice, and the picture had always made her shrink and draw back in her thoughts. She now saw that it was nothing of the sort, that it was far more like an excursion along a charming path into a kind of enchanted country. The regions beyond looked incredibly inviting and alluring, and gave her no hint of difficulty or danger. She would continue to find her way through them quite easily, and return if and when and how she pleased.

"It's the woman who sets the pace, always," she told herself.

She was accustomed to picturing herself in relation to men as most pretty and fortunate American women picture themselves—as a lion-tamer with a great whip round whom the lions crouch and perform and obey, gather themselves sometimes, rocking, for a possible spring, but through fear of the whip never leap. Only one man had ever attempted to dominate her, her short-tempered father, but as he controlled every five-dollar bill that passed through her fingers, controlled the very breath she drew, such a domination was not difficult. But in every other relationship with men she was conscious of belonging to the sex that held the centre of the ring. To be a woman was to have the whip given into one's hands. To be a pretty and high-spirited woman was to find out the secret of cracking it.

They dined late that evening in the little dining-room with the white plaster walls and red curtains and red tiled floor. The food was of that simple and good Italian sort that seems to combine the taste of the peasant with the taste of the epicure. They drank Italian wines, Asti Spumante, or Rufina, and after dinner the aromatic Strega. In the drawing-room they sat and talked by the fire, and the conversation turned on matrimony. Francis maintained that marriage was for the

brainless, that intelligent people should make other arrangements.

"Any man or woman," he said, "who is able to pass a certain mental test ought to be let off. People should be examined physically to see if they are fit for it, and mentally to see if they're unfit for it. In other words, physical fitness should let one in and mental fitness should let one out. Look at the divorce courts—full of intelligent people who can't make it work. To marry happily one needs an uninquiring, single-track mind. Morons make the best husbands, placid, stupid and productive women the best wives. The higher up in the mental scale you go, the more failures you find. Look at the married lives of geniuses!"

Althea argued with spirit but without heat. She had discovered in less than a year that the difference between the talk of Americans and the talk of Englishmen is that the Englishman hates stating the obvious, and the American, if it happens to be what he thinks, doesn't mind. In the ears of the self-conscious Englishman are the echoes of a million voices saying the same thing, and some saying it better than he can ever hope to say it, so he tries to say it in some other way, or says what he doesn't think at all, just for variety. That is why an Englishman—apart from a certain type of politician who is the same the world over—hates utterances of a patriotic nature. They remind him of all the bad and sententious speeches that have ever been made, and he shudders. The American is less troubled by echoes. If George had been asked his opinion of matrimony by Harry Sullivan, he might have turned it off with a funny story. If Mary had asked him, he would have tried to say exactly what he thought, and it would have been an answer that a girl of sixteen wouldn't have blushed to make. There would have been a flavour of robust optimism in it, and the sound of angels' wings, and something of the last pages of a million popular novels. But he would have said it just the same.

Not so Francis. That was why talking to him had become

such a pleasurable affair for Althea, now that she had grasped these differences. He wasn't afraid to say what he didn't think. If people misunderstood him, that was their lookout.

Mary laughed and threw in a word here and there, but she wasn't in the mood for such arguments, and she presently got up and went to the piano. She had found some old Italian songs in a cabinet, and she now took them out and in a low, pleasant voice sang, "Se tu m'ami," and "Pastorella." Her long fingers fell lightly and easily on the keys, and a peace fell on the room, as though the notes had convinced not only the listeners, but the very tables and chairs, of the truth of their message—the folly of everything but music.

When she had finished she said it was time for bed, and Althea agreed that it was, and went up with her, leaving Francis by the fire. The two women talked in Mary's room for a while, discussing Francis—a topic full of interest for both of them—and then Althea went to her own room. She began to undress, slowly, taking off her rings and necklace, but when she had done this she paused, thinking. A wish had come to her, a strong, active, imperative wish, to see Francis again for one moment, to say good night to him, alone. They had had such a wonderful day, those moments alone with him on the hillside had been so lovely, she wanted to round it all off in some suitable way, to complete it. Why shouldn't she go down again? There was no reason at all. Anybody might have to go down again, to look for something, perhaps. What should she look for? A book? No, she had come up with her book under her arm. That bracelet, that was always falling off. She might easily have dropped it somewhere. It was just now that she would have noticed it. "What a coward I am," she thought, "to want such an excuse." But certain conventions must be observed, no matter how silly, and one didn't go downstairs again after once going up without some reason. She took off her bracelet and went quietly out into the hall. Standing close to her door was a little table, and she laid

the bracelet down just under it, in a shadow. Then she went to the stairs and descended slowly into the drawing-room. Francis heard her coming and got up.

"I must have dropped my bracelet somewhere, Francis. That one that's always coming off. If it isn't in plain sight I won't bother. I can look for it again in the morning, or Dante will find it, perhaps."

"It can't be far away," Francis said. "I've noticed it on your arm since dinner." He searched the chair she had been sitting in and the carpet near it, while Althea went towards the piano and returned, her eyes on the floor.

"Never mind. It doesn't matter. It's probably upstairs. I'll look for it again as I go up."

He watched her as she went towards the stairs, and there was a sort of longing in the eyes of both.

"Good night again, Francis." Her voice was low. "What a lovely day, wasn't it? I shall never forget it."

"Yes. It was lovely. Althea . . ."

"What?" She paused and turned toward him, lingering.

"Must you go up . . . yet?"

"I must . . . yes. . . . Pleasant dreams, Francis. . . ."

Her voice wavered, almost broke. It was little more than a whisper.

He strode after her and caught her about the waist. He was not smiling, but perfectly grave and intent. In the house was that thick, heavy silence that seems to fall only when two people are in love and alone.

Althea stood motionless, as though his touch had turned her to lead. Both arms hung at her sides, her eyelids closed, and over her face came a look of ecstasy and of pain; of tragedy, almost, as though destiny had overtaken and caught her against her will. Francis held her silently, looking into her face with a kind of passionate curiosity. A moment had come that they had both known would come and that one of them had hastened intentionally, unable to bear the strain of waiting any longer, and yet both felt at that instant that they were

moved by some power outside themselves. He bent his head, slowly, and kissed her neck, under her hair, and she shivered. Then he raised his head again with that same deliberation, and kissed her mouth, and she was still as a dead bird.

After an immeasurable, static interval, somewhere in the house a door opened, and she swayed out of his arms. She stood leaning against the banisters, a lovely, drooping figure. Francis recovered himself first, and said briskly, tonelessly:

"Well, we'll look for it in the morning. I don't think it's here."

She sighed and drew herself upright.

"No. I don't think it is. Thank you for helping me look. Good night."

He took her hands and kissed them.

"Good night." Then he whispered, "You lovely thing."

She went up and along the hall to her room, wondering at her ability to walk at all. She felt like a drunken woman. She let the bracelet lie where she had left it, a silent witness to the genuiness of her loss. If Francis should think that she had gone down in the hope or expectation of being kissed . . . ! But he would know better. It had simply happened . . . and oh! how exquisitely it had happened. She moved about her room doing aimless, half-conscious things.

"Oh, Francis, Francis! Where are we going to, my darling, my darling! What's going to happen to us? How lovely it was!"

She was exultant, but a little fearful. She had worked for this, she had longed for it, and now she was beginning to be alarmed at the lengths to which they had gone, and—the most unaccounted-for part of the whole matter—the strength of her own emotions. She had wanted Francis to like her, love her, but she hadn't thought so much about the part she would play. And now she realized how entirely she had left this out of her calculations. She went to the window, and saw that a small moon was cradling its image in the fountain. A nightingale was singing, and the air was soft and inviting. With

a little apprehensive shiver she closed the window and drew the curtains. As she undressed, more mistress, now, of her actions, she could hear Francis moving about in the next room. Oh, what was he thinking? What pictures of her and of that moment by the stairs were passing through his brain? Between the minds of human beings was a wall, she now perceived, thicker than the wall between her room and his. She didn't know, she might never know, what was in his mind. It was suddenly borne in upon her that she might be going to suffer, and tears came to her eyes.

But she had a way of viewing herself and reviewing her life that rarely failed to give her confidence and comfort, and she now made use of it.

"How extraordinary it all is," she thought. "Here am I, nobody in particular, and coming to Europe without a single friend, and now I'm staying in this adorable villa with Mary Monash, a woman everybody admires and wants to know, and Francis Mortlake, one of the most attractive and desirable men in all England; probably the most eligible. And Francis is in love with me. Yes, in love, in love. And he's thinking about me at this instant in that next room. And if I'm clever, if I keep my wits about me, he'll be devoted to me for a long time, years perhaps. Any woman would envy me. And I suppose most women would lose their heads and want more. But I only want him for a friend, a devoted friend. Of course, if things were different, if I were different . . . but I'm not going to think about that at all. I shall have difficulties with George, who won't understand, of course. Well, he'll have to understand. I don't want anything but a devoted friend who'll think of me first and help me in everything. I don't want a lover. Can't you understand, George?"

No, George probably couldn't understand.

"He'll come to it gradually," she thought, "if I'm patient and don't quarrel with him, and don't give in to him. Oh, if only I'd met Francis six years ago! But there's no use wishing that now. He might not have cared for me six years

ago, anyway. Marrying and having a child changes and improves a woman so. I'm far more attractive now than I was then. But what mightn't I have been if I'd married Francis? How difficult life is! Nothing ever seems to come at the right time, or in the right way. But I oughtn't to complain, I suppose. I've got this . . . and he loves me, he loves me! I thought when he came and caught me at the foot of the stairs my heart would burst inside my body. I knew what would happen if I went downstairs. We couldn't help ourselves. I don't care. I wanted it to happen. I've had what I've had, and it was wonderful and lovely—— Oh, Francis, how lovely! And it will never, never happen again. Only, what will it be like when we meet to-morrow . . . and the next day, and the next?"

X

WHEN GEORGE received Althea's letter saying that if he didn't mind they would stay in Florence another two weeks, he believed that all his fears and premonitions were proving true. As he looked back he could remember exactly what he had felt that night before they left New York, and the sense of disaster, like a faraway rumble of guns, and the dread thoughts of separation that had so unaccountably troubled him then.

"A man ought to follow his intuitions in these things," he said to himself. "I had a genuine premonition, and I ignored it. I was so damned weak I just gave in to her like I always do. So I can blame myself for all this, not her."

He almost wished Cleve would show symptoms of a cough or cold so that he could wire her to come home, but the boy was never better, and seemed quite untroubled by his mother's absence. The little grey dog, the park, the garden, his nurse and the small daughter of an acquaintance of his mother's whom he met almost daily by the Round Pond, filled his life, his regular, simple life, and he was placid and sweet-tempered.

Two more weeks of Francis and of Florence. More than one hundred and sixty-eight waking hours, George said to himself, during every minute of which his peace of mind and his happiness were threatened. He thought Grieves looked at him too understandingly when he said at breakfast:

"Mrs. Goodall is staying in Italy a little longer, Grieves. She expects to be home two weeks from next Tuesday."

"Yes, sir. Quite a number of people have telephoned to ask when madam would be back and I said Tuesday. Shall I ring them up and tell them she'll be away another fortnight?"

"Oh, no, I guess you needn't bother to do that. Tell them if they ring up again, that's all. I won't be in to dinner tonight. I don't much care about dining here alone."

"No sir."

He telephoned to Mrs. Allgood from the City an hour later, and said he'd like to come around after dinner if she was going to be in.

"But why after dinner?" she asked. "Come to dinner, of course."

"No; I guess I'll just dine by myself somewhere and come around afterwards for a while."

"I guess you'll do nothing of the sort, my dear George. Why should I have to dine alone? I'll expect you at eight. Don't dress if you'd rather not."

"Oh, yes, I'll dress. But say, Kate, don't ask anyone else, will you? I want to talk to you, if you don't mind."

When he came that evening she saw at once from his eyes, which looked restless and feverish, that something had happened to cause him acute distress and disquiet. She guessed what it was, but didn't allude to it. Instead she amused him with trifles, knowing that he would prefer to await his own time. She had had a visitor that afternoon, an old Frenchman who had acted with her in the old days. He had never had anything but small, unimportant parts, was incredibly poor, and now his mind had become a little unbalanced. She was very sorry for him.

"He was like a child," she said, "even in those days. He always said exactly what he thought, and we were all fond of him. He was small and very thin, and old age has made him smaller. He was a great connoisseur of women's clothes, and we used to consult him if we were in doubt about what to wear. That was his great hobby and interest, and now, poor old thing, it has become a mania. He's one of those borderland cases that are so difficult to deal with, but fortunately he's so harmless there's really no need to deal with him at all. His mania is speaking to women he doesn't know in public places

about their clothes. Nobody really minds. He looks at them purely from the æsthetic point of view. He went up to a woman I know at a picture gallery recently and said, 'I think, Madame, if you will pardon my saying so, that black shoes would have looked better with that costume than grey. Otherwise I find all the details of your toilette quite perfect. *Mes compliments!*' And another time he was overhead saying to a woman at a charity bazaar, 'Madame, as a humble admirer of your sex and of yourself, I implore you not to wear purple. Permit me to advise you to give that dress to your maid. You should wear brown, beige, black, flesh pink or dark red. Purple, never. But your shoes, gloves and hat I find faultless.' He's invariably right, too. He lives on some sort of hostel in a room off the Tottenham Court Road."

Later she spoke regretfully about the weather, which, though mild, had been consistently cloudy.

"After a succession of dull days in the spring," she said, "one feels as if one had been sitting interminably in a theatre waiting for the curtain to go up on a much-talked-of play."

"They're having wonderful weather in Florence," George said.

"Oh, I'm glad of that. It makes all the difference there. What a delightful time they must be having!"

"Fine, from all accounts," he answered shortly.

"They're staying longer than they said they would," she thought. "I'm sure of it. Poor George." She said aloud:

"Two weeks is a ridiculously short time to spend there. I don't see how they can contrive to see half the things they ought to see."

"There's as much to see as all that, is there?" he asked.

"Oh, there's more. It's quite endless. I could spend two weeks very happily in the Ufizzi Gallery alone."

"Could you? Well, as a matter of fact, they're staying on another two weeks. I heard to-day."

"I rather thought they would," she said. "One doesn't get to Florence every day."

George chose to change the subject here, and he changed it laboriously.

"Well, tell me what else you've been doing, Kate. What did you do yesterday?"

"Yesterday, George, I went to a wedding, a thing I hate, but it was a nephew of my husband's, and I'd promised. All the time I was watching it, I was thinking, 'What on earth's the good of tying those two people up so elaborately and fussily, and with so much holiness, when anyone can see they'll want to be untied in about a year."

"Will they? Why?"

"Oh, it's a most ridiculous marriage! He's quite a charming young man with some very nice qualities, and he's been caught—it's painfully obvious—by an adventuress: the sort of young woman who counts on a certain showy and vulgar sex attraction to get her what she wants. His family did what they could to stop it—which wasn't much—because it was so clearly a case of infatuation. She looks like a second-rate film vampire, and she'll bore him crazy as soon as he comes to his senses—or is released from them—for he's an intelligent fellow. I always think that for a man to take a woman to wife simply because she attracts him physically, is like keeping an elephant because it can pick up pins with its trunk."

This amused George, and his face cleared and brightened, and she saw that he was coming out of the gloom that had enveloped him. But the moment they were alone in the drawing-room, all the good she had done him was undone by a sudden access of acute anxiety. It was caused, strangely enough, by the very fact of the pleasure he took in her talk and in her company. If he felt all that for a woman of fifty, he, George, whose whole life was bound up in Althea for as long as they both should live, what might not Althea, in Florence, be feeling for Francis, who was young, in every way attractive, and, George was convinced, in love with her? What he felt safely and sanely and harmlessly for Mrs. Allgood, Althea must be feeling wildly and dangerously and

critically for Francis. If he who utterly adored his wife was thus drawn to another woman, what must be happening to Althea, who was merely fond of him?

When they were seated in armchairs on either side of the fire, Mrs. Allgood with the coffee-tray beside her, he suddenly burst out:

"I'm afraid I'm going to be a terrible bore to-night, Kate, but I'm going to tell you my troubles. I've got to I'm worried crazy about Althea. I'm pretty near out of my mind with worry. And I've got another awful fourteen days of it in front of me. I believe she's fallen in love with Francis Mortlake. God, it's awful! What am I going to do? I don't believe she cares a damn for me any more, and wants to get rid of me. Or if she doesn't actually want to yet, she will want to. I feel like going and jumping into the Thames."

"My dear George," exclaimed Mrs. Allgood, startled, "be calm, be calm. It strikes me you're talking with a good deal more claret than clarity. I don't believe a word of all this. Not a word. What reason have you for thinking it? Is it simply because they've decided to stay another fortnight? That seems to me the most natural thing in the world, as I told you at dinner."

He leaned forward and, picking up the poker, plunged it into the fire. No man could have sat still and said what he was saying, and she knew he couldn't look at her till he had finished saying it.

"Yes; no. Oh, no, it started before. I expected it. The whole trip was kind of fixed up, I guess. Or it looked like that to me. I'll tell you the whole story. I'll tell you everything if you'll listen, Kate. It started out in Biarritz last summer. . . ."

Mrs. Allgood listened attentively, and her brain was working all the time. Was he right, or wasn't he? As he talked she saw little pictures of Althea and Francis together. She saw them bathing at Biarritz, two very attractive figures, walking out of the sea. She saw them dancing in London, she saw them walking off side by side—as indeed she had seen them—

at Whittleworth Park. She saw them at Fiesole at sunset, looking down on Florence, she saw them strolling between high walls along some lane bordered by tapering cypress trees, she saw them moving from picture to picture in the galleries. And all the while she tried to see them at George's suggestion, as people who were in love. Her mind pulled wires, but her imagination, perhaps because it wasn't a jealous one, failed where it should have been vivid and inventive. That cold, bright, self-sufficient little woman in love? She couldn't picture it.

"It's no good," she said, when he had finished. "I simply can't see those two in the role of lovers. There's something lacking. Of course, I don't know much about Althea's temperament, but . . . no, I can't see them as you do. I'll admit that the most discerning eye can be deceived at times, but I must say, it never entered my head at Whittleworth. And bear in mind that Francis has met most of the seductive ladies in London and Paris, as well as those who come to London and Paris from your country He's been shamelessly run after—though I can understand that—and so far as I know he's never been mixed up in a scandal of any sort. And that, my dear, argues great discretion. He's responsive, and on the surface very much of a gallant, but there are undercurrents in Francis that I doubt if your wife or the other women he makes himself pleasant to know anything about."

She paused, as though to sum up her thoughts, and went on:

"No, quite dispassionately and without bias, I can tell you I don't believe he's in love with your wife. No, I don't believe it. As for what she feels for him . . . well, she's attracted no doubt. He's so much the sort of man—I'm thinking now of his position and name and everything—that every woman thinks she deserves. And he's a feather in her cap, of course. I mean, to be admired by Francis and seen about with him adds something to a woman's opinion of herself. But, my dearest George, as for wanting to be rid

of you, it's sheer nonsense—the wild imaginings of a loving and jealous man. There's not a word of truth in it. Quite apart from you, what about the boy? Do you suppose she'd give him up? It's perfectly absurd."

He answered with something like a groan:

"She knows darn well that if anything happened I'd give him up."

She sat upright in her chair, staring at him.

"George, are there no limits to your folly? Do you seriously mean that if Althea preferred Francis Mortlake and asked you to release her, you'd give up your son?"

"I certainly would," he said.

She beat the arm of her chair with her fist.

"Idiot! Idiot! Oh, George, for pity's sake, stop this maudlin quixotism! It sickens me. That is the sort of thing women take advantage of. That is the sort of thing they secretly resent and distrust. Men who are willing to do such things are the men women leave. Why should you be ready to give up your son? Why, why?"

"Well, I'll tell you," said George, unmoved by her indignation. "I'd be ready because, as long as a woman isn't out-and-out *bad*, I think she *always* ought to keep her children. It's because I think men have darned little to do with bringing them into the world, and that little is done selfishly. It's because women have to suffer months and months of inconvenience and of looking awful, and because they take all the risks and have all the pain. It's because, even when the worst is over, it's still the women who have all the petty worries and the anxieties, and are tied to the house when the children are ill, and kept awake at night when things go wrong. In the old days, the father had all the rights. Nowadays most people seem to think it ought to be fifty-fifty. But I'm darned if I can see it like that. It seems to me that a child's nine-tenths its mother's, and one-tenth its father's—while it's too little to choose for itself, anyway. I always have thought like that and I always will."

As she was about to speak he hurried on:

"It's all women I'm talking about, not any particular one. But my case is the same as anyone else's. I'll fight to keep Althea, I won't give her up till I . . . well, till I'm pretty certain she doesn't want to stay. But if she makes up her mind once and for all that she wants to go, Cleve goes with her. He goes if it kills me."

"My dear foolish George," she said soothingly, "you're working yourself up for nothing. At the end of two weeks you'll have Althea back entirely unchanged, and glad to be home. Women aren't quite the opportunists you seem to think they are. Althea has too much at stake. Besides, she's very fond of you. She looks to me, and I'm sure she is, a satisfied and happy woman. I mean, as far as one can be satisfied nowadays, with restlessness and chaos as contagious as influenza."

"She hasn't looked happy this last six months."

"Your fevered imagination again, I suspect. This little harmless fling means nothing. Has she ever shown any marked partiality for anyone be- -e?"

"No, never."

"Oh, well then, good heavens, it's time she did. A woman who never looks at any man but her husband is in grave danger of not being looked at by any man at all. My dear, this is a slight kicking up of heels. All this pother is for nothing. And you'd already divorced Althea in your mind, and almost died of it. Or, I suppose you'd allow her to divorce you?"

"Yes, I would."

"Well, refrain from telling her so. It's asking for trouble."

"Oh, she knows it all right. We've talked about other people's divorces often enough. She knows what I think a man's got to do."

"Nothing would infuriate me more," said Mrs. Allgood, and her handsome eyes flashed, "if I thought of breaking

up my marriage, than such an attitude on the part of my husband. I should *insist* on his divorcing me. I should *want* to shoulder the responsibility. I should *want* to be divorced. As long as women shrink from the results of the very freedom they long for, it's absurd for them to ask for political equality or any other sort of equality. It's cowardly and silly. This wanting it both ways makes me very tired."

"Well, that may be," said George, "but that's how it would be done if I had anything to do with it. If Althea left me there isn't a darn thing that I'd want to keep. She could have the divorce, she could have the boy, she could have all the money she wants, she could have every stick of furniture we've bought together, and I'd cut loose and go to Mexico, or East Africa or somewhere, anywhere." His face looked haggard and stricken, and his eyes apprehensive. "And if she takes it into her head to like him better than she does me, what can I do or say that's going to stop her? How can I prevent it? Oh, Kate, it's driving me crazy. I can see them together the whole time, talking and looking at each other. It's no good your saying that because it's the first time it doesn't mean anything. I look at it just the other way. She's never bothered about any other man before, and that makes it about a million times worse."

"George, George," she broke in, "stop talking for a minute, and let me have a word. I think all this is nonsense. I think it's the most natural thing in the world that those three should want to stay longer in Florence. The pity is that you're not there too. Why didn't you go? Couldn't you have gone?"

"Oh, well, you know how it is. I could have gone, but there was plenty to do here, and . . . damn it all, how much *ought* a man to give in to his wife, anyhow? My sales manager hadn't been with me so long I felt I could suddenly shove all the responsibility on him and leave. And I was planning to go abroad in the summer. I didn't feel justified in taking two holidays so close together. And after that row I had

with Althea, I thought it would look as though I were just going to keep an eye on her. I couldn't do it."

"Go, now," she suggested.

He shook his head.

"She'll think it's because I don't trust her."

"Well, but you don't. You've made that quite clear. If you did, you wouldn't be going through this little hell of jealousy. Anyway, trust is a silly word, and meaningless. You can't *trust* any woman not to fall in love, or man either. But I don't believe Althea has fallen in love, nor do I believe Francis has. And there's Mary Monash. She's a sensible woman. If she'd seen any inclination on Althea's part to lose her head, she wouldn't have encouraged her to stay another fortnight."

"That's the most reassuring thing you've said yet," George told her. "I hadn't thought of that. Only Mary is so wrapped up in her own thoughts and her own affairs a lot of the time, she might not notice."

"Well," said Mrs. Allgood, summing up, "you must do one of two things. Either go t Florence—it's quite open to you to change your mind, especially now that they've changed theirs and are staying longer—and see for yourself what the situation is, or stay here and stop worrying. Otherwise you've got a ghastly time ahead of you, and your nerves will be on edge when she does get back. I advise Florence."

"I don't think I'm wanted there."

"On the contrary, they'd welcome you. Three s a bad number."

"I can't do it, Kate. The spectacle of a man going round chaperoning his own wife seems to me pretty cheap. Gosh! I suppose hundreds of men have gone through this, poor devils!" He got up. "Kate, I've bored you enough. I'm going home."

"No, George dear, don't go yet. Have a drink. I wish I could say something to you that would clear your mind

of worry and suspicion, but I've said all I can. What are Althea's letters like? No, nothing for me, thanks."

George poured himself out a drink and came back to the fire.

"She describes the scenery a good deal, and says she's crazy about the Continent, and then she ends up with 'I must hurry up and finish this. The car's waiting. Love to you and Cleve. In haste, Althea.'"

Mrs. Allgood laughed.

"You've got it by heart. George, what a dear you are!" She got up and stood beside him. "You poor soul. I'm so fond of you. I'd do anything to help you. What can I do?"

He put his glass on the mantel and turned toward her.

"I'm hanged if I know, any more than you are doing. And that is, making life bearable just now. I don't know what I'd do without you."

He looked affectionately into that pleasing and lively face. Like most women who have appeared much in public, she stood and moved beautifully. She was a remarkable woman, and she really was fond of him, he believed. Never before had he had a friendship of this sort. She returned his look frankly, and there was a sort of wonder, of speculation in her eyes.

"It's curious, this affection I have for you. A good deal of it's motherly, of course. And I hate seeing you so distressed. Promise me you won't worry any more."

"It's easy to say stop worrying," he answered. "I wake up in the night and lie awake for hours thinking about it. I felt the sweat break out all over me last night when I woke up because I saw there was a moon. And she says there are nightingales."

Mrs. Allgood laughed.

"You'd think Francis was a sentimental undergraduate. He's seen moons before, my dear, and heard nightingales."

"Not with her."

"George, go to bed. I give you up. I haven't done you an

atom of good. People with fixed ideas rejoice in them, I believe. Go to bed."

"All right. But I do feel better, honestly. Come out somewhere with me to-morrow night."

"Yes, I think I will. Let's not bother to decide where to-night. Call for me at eight."

"Good night, Kate, you angel," he said. "You're so darned good to me. . . ."

"Good night, child. Read some more of the Dialogues before you go to sleep. They'll take your mind off any woman."

Moved by gratitude and affection, he leaned toward her and kissed her cheek. Instantly she encircled his head with her arm and drew his face closer against hers. Then, turning her head slightly, she kissed his hair, at the temples, and released him. Such was the kindness they felt for one another.

When he had gone she continued to stand by the fire, looking down into it and thinking. It was strange how he had come into her life, strange, strange. She had never for one moment lost her interest in men—such women never do, and it is half their charm—but she was surprised at the depth and warmth of her feeling for him. She wanted to guard his head from blows, he seemed so curiously vulnerable and unprotected. He loved Althea so wholly, so unquestioningly. His little world was so restricted, and occupied him so completely. His wife, his child, his business; his business, his wife, his child. That was all there was. No criticism, no doubt of Althea as the one woman for him, or as a complete and perfect and finished personality, had ever entered his head. Happy is the non-introspective and uncritical mind, she thought, until disaster falls. Then it is like a small, lost child, deserted and left to the wolves.

And it seemed to her that George's situation was becoming intensely pathetic. He had been uprooted by Althea and brought to a country of which he knew little and for which he had cared less. And to please her he had adapted himself to it, slowly, painstakingly. So far as he could he

had learnt its language and adopted its ways. And all this without a murmur. And now she wasn't satisfied. She had discovered yet other joys, other goals. She had discovered that the Continent was both a school and a playground of the most agreeable nature; she had discovered the delights of contact with minds more swift and sophisticated than his.

For however much Mrs. Allgood pretended she thought all was well, she really had the gravest doubts. She herself had always been attracted to Francis, and he was not a novel type to her. She had known, in her long experience, other men who in this way or that resembled him. She had been to Hawfield, she knew his mother; she had no illusions as to the attraction—in themselves and without relation to other things—of position, place, title. She wouldn't have been in Lady Beauvais's place for anything. Nor, if she had had a son, would she have wished him in Francis's. But it was impossible to ignore the mental and physical attractions of Francis as a man. And she saw in Althea's volatility, adaptability and only partially concealed ambition—but particularly in her ambition—very grave enemies to George's happiness. And because she was a woman who limited herself to a few friends, and those few very real and near to her, she began to be acutely interested in his happiness.

George . . . what a charming, simple, lovable soul. Too simple, of course, his simplicity almost irritated at times. She was the first person who had ever encouraged him to think for himself and to acquaint himself with the thoughts of minds superior to his own. She wished she could direct his education for a year or two. She would like to tease that mind of his into activity, to irritate, perplex, and excite it. It was a good mind, but it hadn't enough to work on.

"I've got two weeks more," she thought, "to do what I can. I've done something already. He questions things now he never thought of questioning before. Perhaps he won't thank me for that." She played with this thought for a moment, then put it aside. "Of course he will. If to extend

one's personality, to extend thought, feeling, understanding, imagination, wherever possible, is the duty of each and every one of us, as I believe it is, then I'm doing something for that dear George. How spontaneously and charmingly he kissed me! This tenderness I feel for him is almost cause for alarm. Ten years ago it would have been. That attractive, self-sufficient, hard little wife of his hasn't half his charm, half his niceness. And yet the majority of people are completely captivated by her. At Whittleworth Park, for instance, 'What a fascinating creature Mrs. Goodall is!' people said. 'How beautifully she dresses! What lovely feet! What a lovely figure! What a pity he's so dull and quiet! American women are wonderful, but the men are hopeless outside their offices.' "

These light and superficial opinions annoyed her. She had been George's champion since that first night at dinner. She would continue to be his champion should a domestic crisis arise, and, in spite of her reassuring words, she feared that it might.

XI

FRANCIS HAD a contempt for cocktails, a contempt that was shared by neither Althea nor Mary. When they went to Doney's in the Via Tornabuoni before lunch—as they managed to do nearly every day—he drank a glass of old brown sherry while they had a Martini apiece. Althea sometimes had two, and they made her eyes sparkle, and sent the colour into the clear, pale brown of her cheeks, and made her forget her Anglicisms and speak freely and slangily which Francis preferred. A cocktail had precisely the opposite effect on Mary. It made her eyelids a little heavy and gave her face a serene, calm look, as though she were at peace with the world.

They sat at a little table in the corner and watched the smart, noisy crowd that pushed for places and snatched at chairs and laughed and chattered and gossiped, in accents that were curiously mixed. There were pretty American girls there, day after day, with some sleek, handsome young Marchese or other—for of these Florence seemed to have a generous supply. There were young Fascist officers with neat, snug waists and rakish little caps; there were thin English ladies who spent their days doing water-colour sketches of the façades of churches and of the cemetery at San Miniato; there were some fashionable folk from London and there were always the Italian, English and American collectors and art connoisseurs, buying or selling, or both.

One day they saw Mrs. Tilling come in, with some other people. She was hardly seated before she saw them, and advanced to their table with every symptom of delight and satisfaction. She shook hands with all of them, and was

particularly glad to see Francis, who had always been unable—most unfortunately—to come to her parties. She was wearing a magnificent sable coat, and under it one of those simple little silk dresses it takes the genius of Paris to produce. Her hat would have suited a girl of sixteen, but she wore it with confidence and spirit. She told them, while Francis stood with a watchful and speculative eye upon her, that she was staying with Lady Shackles for a month, and they must all come and lunch one day. She wanted them to see the villa and the garden; there was only one other garden to compare with it in Italy, and that was near Rome.

"I'm afraid we're too busy sightseeing to be social," said Mary. She knew better than to let Francis in for anything of the sort.

"Oh, but surely you must eat lunch somewhere," persisted Mrs. Tilling, "so why not at the villa?"

"The fact is, we're planning to go to Perugia," Francis said, coming to Mary's assistance. "And that will take two or three days if we stop at Assisi and Arezzo and Orvieto, as we hope to do."

"Yes, we're sorry to be so vague," Mary resumed, "but as we may go any day now, it would be foolish to make engagements. I think we'd better not try."

"Well, come to Raiola's one night before you go or after you get back, and we'll have a party. There are such delightful people in Florence, and Lady Shackles knows everybody. Have you met the Bartolozzis and the Casablancas? They're so charming."

"How gay that sounds!" Mary said. "As a rule we're so tired at night we simply fall into bed. But if I see a chance, as soon as we know what our plans are I'll ring you up."

"I'm sure you'd like Raiola's," said Mrs. Tilling turning to Althea. "And some of the young men here dance quite wonderfully. Do try to come."

She returned to Lady Shackles, and Francis said, with a stern eye on Althea:

"If you let us in for any party of that sort, you'll have your dear little neck wrung. I don't see myself doing the Charleston with Mrs. Tilling."

"Goodness me, I don't want to go," Althea protested, but she was secretly very much disappointed. She wanted both to meet Lady Shackles and see the villa, and go to Raiola's to dance. She would like to have met some of those good-looking young Florentines. Still, it was gratifying to be identified with people who refused invitations from people like Lady Shackles and Mrs. Tilling. The latter wouldn't have noticed her, she knew, if she hadn't been with Mary and Francis, for she had gauged her social position in New York very accurately by means of a few searching questions while they were at Whittleworth. Perhaps it was on the whole more satisfactory to be refusing invitations from her than accepting them. But she was surprised at the unwillingness of Francis and Mary to know her when she was clearly such an intimate friend of Lady Shackles, who was, after all, quite a figure in London society.

George's wire in answer to her letter telling him of their prolonged stay, read, "All right, enjoy yourself, all well here." This completely reassured her, and she hardly thought about him except when she wrote, which she did almost automatically, both to him and the nurse, and received from the latter two letters a week reporting on Cleve's health and progress.

Between Francis and herself there had been no amorous passages since that night when he had kissed her, and although he had not avoided opportunities of being alone with her, he had certainly not sought them. That Francis was seriously in love with her she did not doubt at all, and she understood that he would try to refrain from further demonstrations, from further steps of any sort, until she gave some sign of wishing it. He liked George. He had told her so many times. Moreover he knew perfectly well her own views about infidelity and lovers. She might possibly

consider leaving her husband for good—though, of course, she had not yet considered it—but she was not the sort of woman to be unfaithful to him, and Francis knew this.

The idea prevailing in France and, she supposed, Italy, that the home must be kept together at all costs—let what might take place out of sight and in the dark—she thought cynical and horrible. She was American, and she insisted on the right to legalize her impulses. Easy divorce existed for that purpose. Restlessness, the desire for erotic adventure, the longing for self-expression find an outlet in Paris in the obscure *appartement* in some unfashionable thoroughfare; while in New York, and to a certain extent in London, they readily find it via the divorce court.

Many of her friends and George's had taken this route to happiness or fresh adventure, but neither of them had so much as considered the possibility of taking it themselves. Nor did Althea seriously think of it now. Not even when she was envying Francis his superb indifference to the socially great, as when she found he knew the Bartolozzis and the Casablancas and Lady Shackles, and didn't particularly wish to see any of them. What an exquisite and god-like aloofness! He called, alone, on the old Marchesa Bartolozzi, who was very old indeed and almost more royal than royalty, and gave her messages from his father, and he went to see a well-known collector or two, but he made no other excursions into Florentine society, nor would he. Oh, lovely and enviable superiority! And it was with this man that she talked and walked and laughed daily, intimately. And George wrote:

"I've been waiting for weeks now for a fresh consignment of revolving chairs, and I heard yesterday that they'd only just left the factory. They're sold already, and I could handle about five hundred more. It looks to me as though we'd have to put up a factory over here. This European business is a whole lot bigger than I thought. I'm writing to New York about it. We've hardly touched the Continent yet.

I was talking to a buyer from Brussels yesterday, and he said . . ."

Revolving chairs . . . buyers from Brussels . . .! All this tended to reduce and diminish her idea of George and of her life with him, and to enhance the distinguished and spacious existence led by Francis. And a sort of fever entered into her blood, and an impatience with the restrictions and the mediocrity of her circumstances. Why did such brilliant possibilities dawn on her horizon if they meant nothing, if they were not meant to shed some light upon her path? She came from an environment wherein change, progress, improvement were the natural order of things, a kind of law of nature, and it was impossible to refrain altogether from applying this law to matters personal and domestic. The idea of betterment had become a new religion.

This very eagerness of hers, this love of movement, this desire to be up and doing was what Mary most liked in her. She herself was afflicted with the terrible lassitude that often comes with disillusion. She lacked what Althea had, the capacity for surprise and wonder, but in her company she was sometimes able to recapture it. Althea made her want to do things she would not otherwise have thought worth the trouble of doing. Alone in Florence she would have sat quietly on the terrace in the sun, reading, and she would have confined her sightseeing to the art galleries and the churches she liked best, Santa Croce, Santa Maria Novella and San Marco. In London she made a great effort, and went to parties and gave them, while if she had followed her natural inclinations she would have confined her activities to concert-going and charitable work under the direction of her Church. She was a curious combination of spirituality and sophistication, and it was the sophisticated side of her that was attracted and amused by Althea, and she and Francis when they were alone together, freely discussed and examined that vitality and charm of hers which so readily drew people to her.

Francis said that in Florence, except at Doney's, she was

a complete anachronism. With her intense modernity, she seemed to him, as he watched her on their sightseeing expeditions, to be regarding not so much the past of her own civilization, the civilization that had evolved her, as some other, entirely alien and long dead. What a gap there was, after all, he thought, between America and Europe! What a break in time! Between the old Europe and the Europe of to-day there was continuity; between the old Europe and America to-day, was there, he wondered, any continuity at all? And was not the mental attitude of the average American toward old Europe very like the attitude of an Englishman toward ancient Greece? To these speculations he was led by her aloof, bright interest; the same bright interest she might have shown, he thought, for the temples of Egypt, and a very quick and intelligent interest it was. But it seemed entirely detached, as though she were discovering new friends instead of feeling, with psychic certainty, that she was renewing contact with old ones.

But whatever she did, whatever she felt, she pleased and diverted him, for she was very feminine and very charming; and even when she was assuming—for this was an occasional weakness of hers—an erudition she did not possess, very human.

Like most sensitive men, he was immediately aware of any response to his own attractions, and as these responses and reactions work on one another and gain strength from one another, he was conscious of danger. Such emotions as these in such surroundings, where the possessors of even the most sub-normal temperatures must be aware of a certain rise, were not to be taken too lightly. He regretted that first kiss by the stairs, knowing that the first kiss is like the first swallow—the herald of a flock of others—and although he was not at all the sort of man who, when God sent a cheerful hour, refrained, he nevertheless perceived a need for caution.

It was, indeed, in his mind, when a further two weeks' stay was first proposed, to say that he must go back to

London, or Hawfield, or anywhere, but he hated to curtail what was for Mary an unusually happy time, and he managed to convince himself that Althea, like many another light-hearted and pretty American wife he had been privileged to know, flashed and flickered brightly on these occasions, but like heat lightning, never struck. They were masters, he believed, of *feux d'artifices*, and a very gay display they made of them, and only a fool mistakes Catherine wheels for the armaments of war.

One afternoon, when their month's stay was nearly over, Mary went out to tea alone, leaving the other two in possession of the terrace. Francis was reading a book on Baroque art—a period he said he had much neglected—and Althea sat writing a letter to George. She was feeling intensely sorry for herself, for she was in love with one man and was trying to write a normal, wifely letter to another.

"DEAREST GEORGE,

"Here we are on the terrace in the sun, with birds singing and flowers blooming and the loveliest blue sky overhead you ever saw. According to the papers you're having a cold month in London. That's too bad, with May nearly here. What a pity you're not with us in Italy!

"If you ask my advice about building a factory in England, I should say by all means go ahead and build it. I've often given you good advice before—about coming over here, for instance—and although this is something I don't know much about, not being on the spot, I should think it was much the best thing to do." (For it would not keep them longer abroad?) "And then you could put 'Made in England' on everything, I suppose, and you would be giving employment to a lot of British workmen. It seems to me a very good idea." (Her spirits sank as she wrote these words. "If I should ever do what I've begun to *think* of doing, what's the good of persuading George to stay longer in England?" And then, for she was not a cynical woman, she gave a little

shiver and felt slightly sick. Thinking about George now affected her unpleasantly in the pit of the stomach. Poor old George! He hadn't done anything to deserve this. Well, neither had she, and heaven knew it wasn't going to be pleasant for her. It was fate. She couldn't help it. It was life. She wrote on.) "But maybe you'd better not decide till I get back, which will be next Tuesday, and then we can talk it all over properly." (Oh, these future talks!) "I'm glad to hear Cleve's getting on so well. Nurse says he can read quite a lot now, and he signed his name in great big capital letters at the end of her last letter to me. Well, this will have to be all for to-day. I'll probably write once more before we leave here.

"Love to you and a kiss for Cleve,

"ALTHEA."

It was a terrible thing to have married the wrong man, and that was what she had done. George had been the choice of her youth, he belonged to what, in speaking of artists, one called the first period. She had grown away from him, beyond him, and that was the truth in a nutshell. George would have made an absolutely ideal husband for some placid, mindless woman, who would be content to take her ideas and opinions from him and whose life would have been a dutiful blank from the time he left in the morning till he came back at night.

She looked up at Francis and asked with a sigh:

"I wonder what's kept you from marrying all these years, you wise creature?"

Francis looked up from his book.

"Husbands," he answered, with that disregard for accuracy so characteristic of him.

She laughed, but under his light answer she perceived the simple truth. She put the letter into its envelope and addressed it to one of the obstructions of whom Francis had spoken.

"They're not always immovable objects, are they?" she suggested, in the same spirit.

"Ah, there you have my life's tragedy in a few words. Willing wives have unwilling husbands. A new proverb for you." He looked intently at her, so that she wondered, with a sort of fearful joy, what he would say next. "Mary was remarking the other day on your Botticelli look. It's very noticeable to-day. It's the thick eyelids and high cheek-bones and clear, pale skin. Well, I must return to the Baroque and you to your letters."

"I've finished. I'm not going to write any more. Talk to me, Francis. Talk to me, please. I'm feeling horribly depressed."

"Are you? Why? Because all this is nearly over?"

"Yes; isn't that reason enough?" Tears came into her eyes. "It's been so wonderful . . . I can't bear it to end. . . . I can't bear it."

"Althea, I believe you're crying."

"I can't help it. Oh, Francis, I've been so happy! I've just found out what real happiness is."

"Have you? My dear girl, what is it? I wish you'd tell me."

He put down his book and went toward her, interested, troubled, startled by this phenomenon. Then suddenly she covered her face with her hands, and he saw the tears drop through her fingers.

"It's being with you. Oh, why have I made such a stupid, silly muddle of my life?"

He sat down on the edge of her wicker reclining chair and put an arm about her. She was crying in real earnest. Her words made little impression on him; he was thinking far more of her tears, which, like the tears of any woman, completely foundered the practical and the normal for him, and reduced him to an anxious and eager comforter, a comforter at any price. He brought out of his coat pocket a large, soft handkerchief, and pulling away her hands from her face he dried her tears gently and solicitously.

"Don't cry, Althea, poor child, don't. I never saw you cry before. You suddenly brimmed over like a vase. Don't cry."

"How sweet you are to me, Francis! I'll stop in a minute, I promise. Just let me . . . let me . . ."

She cried quietly and softly, without tearing sobs, but catching her breath in long, shuddering sighs. As fast as her tears came he wiped them away, watching her with an anxious, intent face.

"Lean your head against me. That's better. Don't feel miserable because this is ending. What we have had we have got . . . a platitude you may have heard before. And what's to prevent us having it again, in the autumn perhaps, or next spring, or Biarritz again this summer? Anything is possible."

"Oh, but George . . . if only George . . . you don't know. . . ."

"We'll manage George. Don't you worry. Leave it to me. All you have to do now is to stop crying, because tears simply lacerate me."

She leaned her head against his side, against his coat, and closed her eyes. Her breath still came irregularly and spasmodically, but she was beginning to feel comforted and reassured. He bent his head and kissed her hair lightly, and then her forehead. These kisses had nothing in common with those kisses by the stairs, and they seemed to Althea infinitely more significant and promising and tender. Her dreads and difficulties began to lose their sharp outlines. Francis would make everything possible, he would make things easy and simple. There was nothing he couldn't do. For a long time they sat like this in silence. Francis thought this emotional outburst not wholly surprising or unnatural. Such storms came, he imagined, from a total inability to fit the erotic and unacknowledged side of her nature into her everyday life.

She was conscious that she would soon wake from a charming dream to open her eyes on prosaic day, and as long as she saw her life as more prosaic than it was, and romance as more romantic than it could ever be, such transitions

were bound to cause suffering. But it was not his business to point this out to her, nor would she have admitted it. He thought most women profoundly ignorant of their own natures and their own needs. Over-nice traditions kept them from examining, sorting out and confessing to themselves the mainsprings of their own moods and actions, and it was not for him to try to reveal them.

"Forgive me for crying," she presently said. "I don't know what made me . . . I hardly ever cry like that . . . I'm so ashamed."

"The only thing I can't forgive a woman for is for never crying," he answered. "And you cry adorably. But don't do it unless you must, because it alarms me more than I can tell you. Are you all right now?"

He lifted her face to see, his hand under her chin. Her eyes were closed, and her lips still quivered. He kissed her forehead once more and her fingers tightened about his hand. Then the green door swung open with a whine of hinges and the edge of the tea-tray appeared, followed by Dante.

"Tea!" exclaimed Francis, without moving. "It couldn't have come at a better moment."

Dante put down the tray on a table beside Althea and looked at her with kindly sympathy shining out of his brown eyes, for it was quite plain to him that she had been in tears. Then he addressed himself to Francis, and said he hoped they had everything they required. This gave Francis an opportunity to use his precise Italian in a way that he liked.

"Everything, Dante," he said, "but a new world for the signora."

Dante looked up at the sky, at the flowers blooming around them, at the dazzling, sun-lit walls of the villa, and replied:

"But why ask for a new world, signor, when God has made this one so excellent?"

Francis answered, smiling:

"The world is only excellent, Dante, if we are happy."

"The signor is right. Therefore it is wise to be always happy, and for that reason one is a philosopher. Philosophy is to the sorrows and pains of this life what the umbrella is to rain."

This was said with exquisite seriousness and the air of stating a simple and obvious truth, and when he had gone in, Francis translated their conversation for the amusement of Althea.

"Take it from me," he said, "Dante knows what he's talking about."

Althea reached for her bag and began to powder her face with quick, light movements.

"Oh, don't talk to me about philosophy!" she said, with a trace of irritation. "It does well enough at seventy. It may help you to endure, but I don't want to endure, and I don't intend to. I want to change things. I want to be active. I want to make things happen."

"How young!" said Francis, smiling.

"Yes, I'm young, thank heaven, and so it's not too late to make an effort. Why should I be philosophical? I leave that to the nonagenarians."

"But drastic changes," said Francis, enjoying her little show of scorn, "are so often for the worse. Things, left alone, very often have a way of determining themselves satisfactorily."

"Oh, I'm not talking about the map of Europe," she cried, impatiently. "I'm talking about personal problems, and, being a woman, I mean my own personal problems. Isn't there anything in your life," she asked with a straight look at him, "that you want to change?"

"Yes," he said, with unexpected frankness. "There is. But in that respect I'm something of a fatalist. So much so that I believe time will bring it about."

Again that keen glance, over her pocket mirror.

"What makes you think that?"

"It's merely a premonition. I have them now and again. I would place no reliance on them, except for the fact that they sometimes prove correct."

She looked away, and drawing her chair closer to the table, began to pour out the tea, her mind busy with what he had said, and her pulse quickening. She did not regret her tears. To cry in the presence of a man establishes an intimacy that can never be wholly dissolved, and she knew it, being skilful in the wars.

"You remember my saying that Baroque art began with Michelangelo?" he remarked, reaching for his book and opening it. "Well, listen to this."

"Francis, here's your tea," she interrupted, not sure that, at this point, she wished to be read to.

"All right, thanks. I like it to cool. Here we are. Listen to this, I'll read it to you."

And for the next twenty minutes, until the declining sun drove them indoors and Mary returned, she listened to Francis reading about Michangelo and Titian and Rubens, and at the same time thought of the difficulties that lay ahead of her. Francis's policy of *laissez-faire* seemed to her somewhat unsatisfactory and vague, but what he, no doubt, meant to convey was his dislike of abrupt, crude methods. Certainly it was comforting to hear that he believed fate was helping them. They would need, she considered, all the help from fate that they could get. But first of all and all the time they must help themselves.

XII

As TUESDAY approached, George's spirits rose and fell, rose again and fell again. He'd been a fool to worry, everything was all right, and by Wednesday they would have resumed their old life again, the sweet, normal, regular life of a prosperous, happily married couple. Althea would once more talk to him through the half-open door as she lay in her bath; the odour of her bath-salts would drift into his room as he dressed; he would see her once again at her mirror, her quick, slim hands busy with this bottle and that; he would hear the opening and shutting of her bureau drawers, and her light, brisk footsteps. He would come home from the office and find her with Cleve, a slightly altered personality then, a mother, with a watchful face and an authoritative voice, and a way of talking to the nurse that was always a little unfamiliar to him. And at night there would be once again the exquisite consciousness of the presence of her warm, curved body.

And a moment later he would believe that he had lost all this, all this dear intimacy with a being who was not only lovely and desirable in herself, but was also a flattering and necessary extension of himself, so that to imagine himself cut off from her was like imagining himself cut off from his own spirit, from the most vital and precious part of his own ego. And he would experience an agony of mind so acute that it would have been a relief if he could have cried aloud.

Then he would reason with himself, and think:

"But after being away for two whole months she ought to be pretty glad to see me again. She'll have forgotten all about that row we had. She'll have pretty nearly forgotten that I was jealous of Francis. I'll talk about him just exactly

as I'd talk about anyone else, and say I'd like to see him and ask how he is. Why shouldn't I? There's nothing in that. I'll take Cleve and the nurse down to Victoria to meet her if she gets the early train. She'd like that. I guess London is going to look pretty good to her after all this time."

He hoped Tuesday would be a fine day, so that London would be at its best. He had begun to feel a proprietary pride in London now, and he had lately discovered, and confided the fact to Mrs. Allgood, that he loved it.

"It's funny," he said, "I feel as different about London now as though I'd lived here twenty years instead of one. I've got attached to it, like a cat to a hearth. I guess it's a good deal of it your doing."

On Saturday she rang him up to know if he would go to Mullion with her on Sunday, either by train or in his car. She had to go to see the garden and talk to the gardener, and she thought it would be lovely if they could have a picnic lunch there and spend the day. It would probably be their last day together. George was delighted with this proposal, and said that he had arranged to play golf with Harry Sullivan, but that he would soon fix that..

"I'm crazy to see Mullion again," he told her. "We'll go in the Buick, of course. It's a great idea."

April had only two more days to run, and Sunday was warm and bright. The sun had at last come out, but as a convalescent recovering from a long illness, sparing its strength and not exerting itself over much. The country was softly, mistily green, and George recaptured his sensations of nearly a year ago with surprising vividness. He spoke of this to Mrs. Allgood.

"Yes, memories of that sort," she said, "seem to be ineffaceable, and are as real as tables and chairs. My earliest recollections are not of things, but of thoughts about things. I can remember my thoughts about a serious illness I had as a child perfectly, though I can't remember the pains that went with it, or the doctor or the nurse. It's curious how

little impression pain makes on the memory. We can't really remember physical sensations; we only remember what we thought about them, which is a mercy, on the whole."

"Well," said George, "I only hope I won't be able to remember the feelings I've had these last few weeks about Althea. I don't want to live them over again."

"By the end of next week," Mrs. Allgood assured him, "you'll have very nearly forgotten them."

She was dressed for the country in an old tweed coat with a fur collar, and wore thick shoes suitable for a wet garden in the spring. George remarked on their way to Mullion that it must be a fine thing to have a hobby like hers.

"What hobby?" she asked.

"Gardening. Isn't that your hobby?"

"I haven't got a hobby. I don't like hobbies. I hate people who specialize too much in anything, unless it's a profession or an art that may legitimately claim an entire devotion. Hobbies make bores, in my opinion. What's your idea of a bore, George?"

George said he thought it was something heavy and ponderous.

"Not to me," she answered. "I don't mind heavy things. It's active, persistent things that annoy and irritate. When I speak of a bore I think of a tool like an auger or gimlet, that penetrates and makes a round hole; or I think of those unpleasant little insects that bore holes in wood to lay their eggs in—only bores haven't any eggs to lay. No, to me the real bore is the person who can only go in one direction, and who goes persistently, grinding and grinding till he's bored into your very soul, and you're ready to scream with the discomfort of it. People who are merely heavy and dull and inactive are so harmless that it's ungrateful to object to them. It's the grinders and borers who kill."

"Well, that lets me out all right," said George. "I'm one of the harmless ones, I guess."

"You, you dear creature," she returned, "are everything that's agreeable. If William and Althea were out of the way, which God forbid, I'd gladly set up housekeeping with you to-morrow."

George laughed, but he was pleased and flattered.

"I'm afraid I've been a bore these last few weeks," he said. "Now that Tuesday's so near, I can't help thinking I've been an awful fool to worry so. I feel ashamed when I think what you've had to put up with."

"Don't be ridiculous, George. The role of comforter is a role every woman loves, when she can't get a better one." She added, "I've never enjoyed my annual visit to London as much as I have this time, and it's entirely due to you. I've hardly missed William at all, and I haven't once felt jealous of Emmaline."

"You're not really jealous of your sister-in-law, are you? I should think she'd be jealous of you."

"Oh yes," Mrs. Allgood confessed, "I am, horribly jealous, though I struggle with it, of course. Mine's a curious existence, George. I feel like talking about myself this morning. May I?"

"You'll never find a better listener."

"You see," she began. "I'm an actress, and a thing all actresses must have is vitality. Well, I've got it—more than my share, I think. I never tire, or hardly ever. Physically and mentally I like to be as active as possible. On the stage I loved learning difficult parts, and I didn't care how many I played in a short time. I never wanted to rest. Then I married William, and I found myself in a very pleasant and rather intellectual backwater. I was extremely happy in it until that illness of his that changed so much. Now I suffer a sort of double agony. I suffer for his helplessness and I suffer for my own loss—a shadow of his, but bad enough. I'm full of life and energy, and I live with a cripple; the man I love is a helpless wreck. Don't think I'm merely complaining; there is no such thought in my mind. But I die a daily death when

I think what our life was and what it is now. To all intents and purposes William has been snuffed out, like a candle. He makes a few notes, he writes a little, he hobbles painfully about the garden. He breathes the air at Pau and takes the cure at Aix, and that's his life—and what a life for a man! Before his illness we were happy as people rarely are happy. Now he's just as content to be with his sister Emmaline as with me. More so, I think, for with me he's more conscious of his ruin. That's why I say I'm jealous of her. They went away together once when I was ill and couldn't go with him, and that was the thin edge of the white elephant, so to speak, for now they go every year, and Emmaline spends half her time at Mullion. It isn't that I don't like her. I do. She's a fine character, she's sterling, she's British; and by that I mean she has all our good, rather tiresome virtues and none of our humorous, nice failings. She's full of moral indignations, and she more or less brought William up. He's *hers*, and now that he's a cripple, more hers than mine. Now you understand what my life is like. I've never talked to you so frankly before, have I? And I'm young, still, George. I could go back to the stage—there are more and better parts written to-day for women of my age than ever before—I could live again, I could even love and be loved again. I don't want you to pity me—good heavens, no!—but I do want you to know what it's like to be Kate Allgood, just as I want to know what it's like to be George Goodall. A hundred half friendships are less to me than one complete one. For every one of us is a universe, and to see clearly into the life of another person is to know another world."

She stopped speaking and looked at the moving road in front, while George looked at her. He was in love with her honesty, in love with her willingness to lay bare the truth in every direction, to whisk the covers off the mere appearances of things. And he understood for the first time what it must mean for such a woman to suffer her talents, her powers to lie dormant, to see them rot and die from disuse.

He longed to be able to comfort her in some way, to enrich her as she had enriched and comforted him.

"It looks as though you and I had been brought together for an object, Kate," he said. "To help each other, or something. You've certainly helped me, but so far the debt's all on one side. I can only tell you this: Next to Althea and Cleve, you mean more to me than anyone else in the world."

He put his hand over hers and pressed it. She turned her head slowly and looked full in his eyes, smiling.

"Promise me something," she said.

"I'll promise you anything. Go ahead."

"Promise me you won't get fat. I've noticed of late years a decided tendency on the part of American males to run to bald heads and adipose tissue. The bald heads I don't mind, for I don't see how they can be helped—though I confess I'm glad yours is nicely covered—but fat I do mind, and I hope you won't commit that indiscretion. We used to think of American men years ago as lean, lanky, loose-jointed—the Lincoln type, the Uncle Sam type, the Virginian type. Where are they now? And I do so love a bony man, or at least a man who wears his bones somewhere near the surface. Corpulence is a symptom of decay, and for America to show symptoms of decay now is precocious. I'm sure the Romans got fat before Rome fell. I'm not sure the Greeks didn't run to fat in the late period. A little less of your office chair, a little less of your good cooking—promise me, George, you'll be careful."

He promised, amused at her change of mood. He didn't guess what a deliberate change it was.

They went through that lovely village, Britwell Beeches, and presently turned in at the gates of Mullion. The old house lay at right angles to the straight driveway, its closed shutters giving it a peaceful, somnolent look. It was small, gabled, Elizabethan, and built of brick. Its tall chimneys were twisted and ornate, its doorway pointed and Gothic,

with a projecting porch. Lawns of intense greenness surrounded it, with woods at a decent distance, and between lay the rose gardens, the Dutch garden, the herbaceous borders, and beyond them, toward the back, lay the kitchen garden, with its high brick wall and espaliered fruit trees, now in bloom. The birds were making song everywhere, and the air was full of soft, warm promises.

As George observed the green symphony about him, he thought how much he would like to live in a place like Mullion. Whittleworth, which Althea had admired so much, he wouldn't have had for a gift, but a place like this he could be perfectly happy in. It was no good thinking of it, of course. Althea wouldn't dream of living in the country altogether, and he couldn't afford two places yet. He wished that she could see Mullion, all the same. While Mrs. Allgood talked to the gardener and made suggestions and moved with him from one part of the garden to another, George followed them about at a little distance, and wondered what he was going to do about her and Althea. They'd never be friends, however willing Mrs. Allgood might be, and this fact seemed to him curious and unnatural. If Althea didn't actively dislike Mrs. Allgood, she certainly was not disposed to trouble herself about her, and showed no desire to cultivate her acquaintance. How, then, was he to go on seeing her after Althea got back? It was true that in a week or two her stay in London would be over and she would be at Mullion again with her husband and probably her sister-in-law, so he wouldn't be likely to see her anyhow, unless she came to London sometimes . . . and lunched with him. Yes, lunch . . . a man's time was his own then. He'd have to talk to her about that. It was out of the question that he should now give up seeing her; that he should cease to enjoy the treasures of her mind and personality. Look what she'd done for him! She'd given him a completely new outlook on life—or shown it to him, anyway—and a man couldn't suddenly leave all that and swim alone again.

"Come indoors now," she said at last. "It must be time for lunch. Mrs. McDoon, the gardener's wife, has something ready for us—sandwiches and a salad, and a bottle of claret, unless you'd prefer something else."

Most of the rooms were shut up, and the furniture covered with dust-sheets, but Mrs. Allgood's little sitting-room, panelled with old oak, had been made ready for visitors, and there a fire had been lighted and a small table spread, and George sat down to the most private and intimate meal he had ever had with her.

"You'll have to come up to London sometimes, when you've come back here, and lunch with me, Kate," he said. "I've been thinking, while I was following you round the garden, that it isn't going to be very easy to see you later on."

Mrs. Allgood agreed that it wasn't.

"I'd ask you both down to stay," she said, "for a week-end now and then, but I doubt if Althea would care about it, or find William and Emmaline very stimulating company. But if you'd come alone, it would be delightful." He was silent, so she added quickly: "No, no, how stupid of me! I forgot that American wives go here and there independently of their husbands, but well-brought up American husbands do not go independently of their wives. I'll lunch with you in London sometimes. That will have to suffice."

"It won't," said George gloomily; "but I suppose it's the best we can do. You'll have to write to me at the office pretty often, though, and I'll write to you."

"Why at the office?" she asked, amused.

"Oh, well, at the house, then. Anywhere; it doesn't matter. I don't know why I said the office."

"Dearest George, I was teasing you. I will write to the office, because I know how wives invariably adopt one of two attitudes in regard to their husbands' friends. They either make jokes about them or they're jealous of them. Althea is much too sensible to be jealous, so she'll laugh at you, and I can't allow that. We must just go on as best we can.

I know I'm good for you, and I know you're good for me, so we won't bid each other good-bye. I couldn't bear it."

After lunch they took a walk, and Mrs. Allgood picked primroses to take back to London with her. As they returned to Mullion George said:

"I could get terribly fond of a place like this."

"Yes," she said, "I thought you could. I adore it, and I hope I'm grateful enough for it. We who live in lovely surroundings ought to be very humble toward those who don't. People who talk unsympathetically about the working classes and live softly themselves ought to find a very special hell waiting for them somewhere. And then to have leisure in which to think, to read and admire—there's no doubt that in many ways I'm a peculiarly fortunate woman."

"You're peculiar in admitting it," said George. "Most people don't."

They crossed a lawn by a little path of broken paving-stones, through which minute forget-me-nots looked up, to a small spring garden enclosed by hedges, within whose shelter jonquils, primulas, narcissus and early yellow wall-flowers, bloomed. Mrs. Allgood began filling a basket with flowers, and George listened to the pleasant staccato noise her scissors made. They talked about a book he had been reading, and he complained that his memory was unreliable.

"I don't remember half of what I read, the way I ought to."

"That doesn't matter," she said consolingly. "One reads to form one's opinions, and that takes place almost unconsciously. And it's the opinions that matter. Those you're bound to modify and change from time to time, but you don't forget them. You make them part of you. That's what reading does, or should do."

George looked at her as she bent over the flower-beds and said to himself:

"That's the kind of woman a man like me ought to live with," and then was amazed at his own thoughts. When a man takes pleasure at the thought of living at a woman's

side, anyone would say that he must be pretty far gone in love. But he wasn't. Good God, of course he wasn't.

"And never be afraid of changing your opinions," she went on. "A man who is constantly searching in his own mind for the truth, will be certain to contradict himself again and again. That's why the demand for consistency in politics is so supremely silly. A man who never changes his opinions may be a boon to his party, but if he's a man of any wits he must be a traitor to himself."

"I guess that's true enough," agreed George.

"Spencer says that life is a continuous adjustment of inner and outer relations. A continuous adjustment," she repeated. "It's absolutely true. Consistency encourages growth about as much as a Chinese woman's shoe does. And all books do is to help you to adjust yourself to life. A delicate, subtle and delightful process. How patiently you listen to me, George! No wonder I love talking to you. One of these days I'll make up for it by listening to you whenever and for as long as you like. I have to be careful what I say when I'm talking to William, because loose thinking or talking irritates him. He likes the considered utterances of philosophers and scientists or the artless prattle of children, and very little in between. Generalizations he simply won't tolerate. Emmaline gets on well with him because she doesn't talk at all. So you see with him I have to go warily."

"Well, I know what line I'll have to take if I see him again," said George.

"Oh, he liked you that day. And, of course, I exaggerate his intolerances. But he was such a delightful host in the old days. He had that genuine 'My house is yours' gesture, and meant it. Oh, George!" she cried, suddenly, "it's terrible, terrible, what illness or an accident can do to human beings. Are our souls, our spirits, only emanations of our bodies, generated by them, made or marred by them? William is a different man. His very spirit seems altered. I can't find the one I knew. I look and look for it. I loved a man with a

calm, generous mind, a man with wit and temperament. Now I love an ailing, querulous savant. Oh, it's tragic, it's tragic . . .!"

She turned quickly away from him, and he guessed that there were tears in her eyes. He wondered what he could say to comfort her, but there seemed to be nothing. She turned toward the house with her basket full of flowers, and he walked beside her.

"Life isn't all roses for you, Kate," he said, presently. "I wish it were."

"Oh, I am 'pierced by the arrows of this ghostly world,' " she answered, "like anybody else. Why should I be let off?"

"Yes; I guess we all are, sooner or later. Well, I'll either be a happy man on Tuesday or shot full of holes. I wonder which."

She smiled at him, all sign of tears gone now.

"Everything will be all right. I can't help believing in your good fortune, well as I understand your anxiety. Most of the troubles men suffer from consist in being loved too well by the wrong woman and not being loved well enough by the right one. But I believe all will be well for you, my dear, I promise you I do."

They were in the doorway now of the empty house. George felt a wave of affection for her fill his heart. With something of a desire to give her a little of that which her life so tragically lacked, and something of a desire to express the generous warmth he felt towards her, he suddenly clasped her and kissed her on the mouth.

"You darling!" he said. "You've got a heart as big as all outdoors. I just adore you, Kate."

She stood there, firm as a rock, and took his kiss. Her dark, fine eyes looked straight into his.

"Bless you for that," she said, and turning, led the way into her sitting-room again. "A cup of tea, and then we'll go back. I hope you've liked the day as well as I have. And it's been delicious to tell you my troubles."

"Dine with me to-night," he begged, like a lover. "We've only got to-night and to-morrow night."

"Oh, my dear George, both nights? Very well. Only you must dine with me to-morrow night. That will be lovely."

When, later, George was dressing in his room at home he was puzzled at the state of his own feelings. At the very moment of his most acute anxiety about Althea, of his most acute longing for her, he found himself at the highest point, so far, of his liking and affection for Mrs. Allgood. He wouldn't have thought such a thing possible a few months ago.

"But how can you help loving a woman like that?" he asked himself. Perhaps he oughtn't to have kissed her, but how sensibly she had taken it—as though he had made her a charming gift. Then, suddenly, in a moment, he was overwhelmed by his old fears. See how unconsciously he had drifted into this, how simply and naturally! Into what kind of relationship, then, had Althea drifted with Francis? Oh, God! What mightn't she be feeling for him? And this was their last evening in Florence, at the villa! If only he'd been able to forget it for another forty-eight hours!

XIII

TUESDAY WAS precisely the sort of day George had hoped it would be. Soft, warm and bright. They'd have a fine crossing, and although they weren't arriving till nearly seven, it would still be daylight. He told Grieves to get plenty of flowers for the house, and suggested tulips. He told the nurse to have Cleve ready to be taken in the car to meet his mother at Victoria. By the time he left the office, at five o'clock, he was so eager and excited that not a single doubt or fear lingered in his mind. She was nearly home. That visit to Italy would soon be a thing of the past—a happy memory for her, a grim one for him, but past, past, past. They would begin afresh, and he had a thousand things to tell her. He saw no reason, now, for returning to America inside of three years, and he could hardly wait to assure her of this. If they put up that factory, and it was practically decided that they should do so, he would have his hands full. It would be like organizing the whole business over again, and he knew that no one could do that any better than he could himself. He felt settled now, he had begun to be aware of his roots. His life had once more fallen into a pleasant and orderly pattern. He would take shooting lessons. He had a good eye, such things came easily to him, and if he took a little trouble he had no fear that grouse, pheasant or partridge would prove too much for him. He'd been obstinate and wrong-headed about it. He'd fought everything, nearly, when he first came over: English ways, English pronunciations, English ideas. He wasn't like that now. When in Rome—and how much more so when in London, and how much easier! He was fond of their spacious, airy house, and of the careful ministrations of the grave but pleasant Grieves,

ministrations that had in them some of the quality of religious ritual. He was no less an American citizen, but he had learnt the trick of transplanting himself. A Norway spruce planted in England is no less a Norway spruce, though it find good nourishment in that alien soil.

Much of this he had realized since Althea had been away. Perhaps he had had more time to think—or perhaps it was talking to Kate so much that had crystallized his feelings and opinions. But he wanted to acquaint her with his altered point of view at the earliest possible moment. He went home elated and in high spirits, and found a telegram waiting for him on the hall table. It was from Paris, and his heart dropped like a stone when he read it.

> "Owing to slight accident Italian train delayed, so missed connexions in Paris. Staying to-night at President Lincoln Hotel, arriving London three-thirty to-morrow. ALTHEA."

He swore, stood thinking for a moment, then rang for Grieves. What cursed luck! What a perfectly unforeseen and infernal nuisance . . .!

"Grieves, there's been a delay. Mrs. Goodall won't be back till to-morrow, about four. Something happened to the Italian train last night, and they missed the Paris train. I'll just dine here by myself. I'll go up and tell the nurse now."

He thrust the telegram into his pocket and went upstairs. His first feeling had been one of intense and bitter disappointment, aching disappointment, and this lasted till he reached the nursery. Then, just as he was opening the door, the black thought struck him, "Perhaps they just wanted a night in Paris, to have a party or something. How do I know? They didn't stop on the way out. Maybe they just made up their minds they'd have a night on the tiles this time."

He felt wounded and angry. Cleve was in the night nursery, being dressed, and when George called out, "Nurse!" he came running in with his coat on and flung himself at his father.

"Hello, boy," George said, picking him up in his arms and kissing him. "How is my son?"

"I'm quite all right, thank you. When are we going to the station? Now?"

"No, not to-day." He put him down. "Nurse," he said, as she came in, "Mrs. Goodall can't get back till to-morrow, at three-thirty. She missed connexions in Paris."

"Oh," Cleve wailed, "I want to go and meet mummie to-day. Why can't I?"

"Because she isn't coming till to-morrow, Master Cleve. Didn't you hear your father say? That's too bad, isn't it, sir? It seems as though she'd been away a long time, now. Master Cleve was looking forward to seeing her to-day, weren't you? But never mind, we'll be ready to-morrow."

"I may not be able to go to the station to-morrow," George said. "I have a rather important engagement. But if I can't, you and Cleve will have to go without me. And if I go at all, I'll have to go straight from the City. I'll order the car to be here at three."

"Very well, sir, we'll be ready. And Master Cleve can have the pleasure of thinking about it to-morrow, too."

Cleve burst into tears.

"I don't want to think about it to-morrow. I want to go and meet her to-day."

George thought he knew exactly how Cleve felt, but he told him to stop crying at once.

"All right, nurse, I'll stay with him for half an hour or so. Get out your blocks, Cleve, and we'll build the Woolworth Building, or anything you like. Only stop crying right away, or I'll go downstairs again, see? None of that. You're not a baby now. You're a big boy."

Cleve stopped crying at once, and with sudden animation ran to the cupboard where his blocks were kept and began pulling out the big box.

"How high'll we build it, daddy? A hundred stories? Ten hundred hundred stories?"

"Oh, we'll see if we can run it up to about twenty first," said George, and getting down on the floor he overturned the box with a pleasing din of falling bricks.

"They thought they'd just like to step out in Paris for one night," he said to himself. "Why couldn't she say so? All that bunk about the train being delayed. . . . I don't believe a word of it. 'What shall we tell George? Oh, tell him we've been held up by a slight accident.' I can imagine how they discussed it. Hell, I'm not going down to meet that train to-morrow. Cleve and the nurse can go. That meeting with Chivers about the factory site oughtn't to be put off. I'm hanged if I'll go. Anyhow, they'll be busy saying good-bye to each other at the station. I'll just come home at the usual time. I've had about enough of this sort of thing."

"It wants a broader base than that, boy, if we're going to run it up to any height," he said. "Oh, I'll tell you what! Let's build the factory. You know I'm going to build a factory, Cleve, to make tables and desks and things. I told you the other day. Well, we'll pretend we're going to build it now, shall we?"

Cleve shouted with delight.

"Oh, yes, oh, yes! Let's pretend we're going to build it now. How high'll be? Ninety stories high? A million stories high?"

"About four, I think," said George gravely. "Come to earth, my boy. We're building in England, not New York. Now for the foundations."

The next day at three he was sitting in his office behind his Goodall desk talking to a stout, red-faced man in a shabby raincoat about a piece of property near Slough, on the Great

Western Railway. It had come down to a question of price. Mr. Chivers had grown so elated at the idea of selling to an American company that his opinion of the value of it was inclined to soar. George was patient. He knew what the property was worth very well, and he realized perfectly that Mr. Chivers was picturing the firm of Goodall and Co. as a powerful American trust with unlimited funds at its disposal. So when he offered a sum that was five hundred pounds less than he was willing to pay and Mr. Chivers countered this by suggesting a sum that was five hundred pounds more than he was willing to pay, he saw that an agreement was within sight. It was three o'clock. If they could come to a satisfactory arrangement within the next twenty minutes, he might still, if he wished, go to the station to meet Althea.

"Well, there you are, Mr. Chivers. We're a thousand pounds apart. That's a lot of money. And at the moment it doesn't look as though we should get any nearer. That site isn't worth what you're asking for it. It is worth what I'm offering for it. Think it over."

He turned about in his chair as though to end the interview, but Mr. Chivers was in no hurry. He took out a pencil and a piece of paper and began working out something by means of figures. He then said that if he were to cut off that half acre to the north and sell it to the adjoining brickworks he could perhaps meet Mr. Goodall in the matter. What did he say to that?

"Just what I said before," George told him. "That piece of property as it stands is worth what I offered. And I don't think you'll get it from anybody else. Well, that's all right. Hold on to it if you don't want to sell. Sixty years from now it may be part of London, the way the city's spreading, and then it will be worth your price, but I doubt if you'll be here to see it." He looked at his watch. "And now I'm afraid I ought to keep an appointment, if you'll excuse me."

Mr. Chivers took up a round cloth hat and proceeded toward the door.

"Seems a pity we can't settle it now," he said.

"We're too far apart," said George, briskly. "Think it over, Mr. Chivers, and if you like, look in at the same time to-morrow. Then you can let me have your last word."

It was nearly a quarter past three when the door closed on Mr. Chivers and George still sat in his chair with his watch on the desk in front of him. There was plenty of time. Those boat trains were apt to be a few minutes late. The truth was that he didn't feel disposed to go. If Althea wanted to keep putting off her return, why should he be kept on the jump, ready to go and meet her at any time of the day or night? For all he knew there might be another telegram waiting for him on the hall table. No, he wasn't going. She had plenty of people to look after her. Cleve and the nurse would meet her, and that was enough. He didn't feel inclined to turn up smiling and kiss her with Francis looking on. Besides, there were a lot of letters he ought to dictate. He rang for his secretary.

"Miss Williams, will you take down some letters, please? The first one is to R. Lemaitre and Company—et Cie, you know—Forty-Four Rue Leopold, Brussels. Dear Sirs . . ."

Two hours later he closed his desk and departed. He had half expected Althea to telephone, but she had not done so. Nor had he. And she had been in London an hour and a half. It suddenly struck him that this was no way to treat a tired woman whose train had been delayed through no fault of hers, and who had had to break her journey whether she would or no. He would have to make that appointment with Chivers seem longer and more important than it actually was. It was consistent with his state of mind at this time that he should now look upon his own behaviour as wrong-headed and ill-advised.

He got into a taxi and told the driver to "step on it," but it was one of those taxis that groan, rumble and clank, stop with a jerk and start again with difficulty, so he arrived in Wilton Crescent feeling nervously exhausted. As he entered the house and closed the door, he thought he heard someone running hastily up the stairs. He put aside his hat and went up to the drawing-room, then, finding it empty, he proceeded to Althea's bedroom, where he found only her maid, busy with her unpacking. He called up the stairs and heard Althea's voice.

"Is that you, George? I'm up here, in the nursery."

He went up, his heart thumping violently. She was standing in the middle of the bright, neat room talking to the nurse, with Cleve holding to her hand. She was breathing quickly.

"Hello, George. I'm sorry you couldn't come to the station to meet me."

They met and kissed each other with Cleve and the nurse looking on. The latter, however, went away into the night nursery and closed the door.

"Yes, I'm sorry," George said. "I had a rather important meeting with a man——"

"Oh, I knew it was business, of course," she replied with pleasantly modulated voice and smile. "How are you?"

"Fine," said George. "How are you? You look well. I guess you've had a wonderful time. I was all ready to meet you yesterday when your telegram came."

"Yes, it was too bad. Something happened in the night just after we passed the French border. We stopped for ages, and men got out and hammered away underneath us. And after that we went slowly and lost time. We missed connexions in Paris by two hours. It was maddening. Nobody wants to spend just one night in Paris like that. Luckily Mary and I both had a change with us, so we dined at a restaurant and went to a revue. But it wasn't much fun

catching the eight-twenty this morning, I can tell you. Cleve looks well, doesn't he? I don't believe he's missed me a bit."

"Yes, I have, mummie," Cleve cried indignantly. "You oughtn't to say that. And I cried yesterday because you didn't come."

She kissed him and fondled his head.

"Children are always disappointed when things are put off," she said, "but I couldn't help it, Clevie."

"I guess other people besides children are disappointed," George remarked.

"Well, you might have met me at the station, all the same. I was expecting you, and so were the others. Never mind. How have Grieves and Mrs. Thompson been getting on?"

"Oh, all right. No trouble at all. Were you sorry to leave Italy?"

They sat down in the small white nursery chairs, Cleve leaning against Althea's knee. Was she sorry to leave Italy? What a question to have to answer. All the way back she had felt heart-sick at leaving it, at leaving Florence at its loveliest and most seductive, at leaving that adorable villa, at leaving the sweet, blond Tuscan countryside, at leaving the most perfect, the most utterly satisfactory bit of life she had ever known, a life that was too dream-like, too happy, to be anything but transient. But, oh, how lovely! And then to come back to housekeeping, to doing without Francis, except at rare intervals, to factory sites and office furniture. Yes, that month when she had lived under the same roof as Francis, inside the same four walls, when she had seen him daily, intimately, intimately, was the happiest of her whole existence. She wanted to tell George so, to state it baldly and brutally in order to relieve her pent-up feelings, her tense nerves. But she only said:

"Oh, yes, of course, in a way. Still I'd been away a good long time."

From George's point of view this was an unsatisfactory enough answer. How distant and strange she was! Was it because he hadn't come to the station? What a fool he'd been to obscure their reunion with a purely adventitious cause for complaint! How could he diagnose her feelings towards him when he didn't know how much of her coldness was due to the fact that she was hurt?

"Come on down to the drawing-room," he said. "I never feel comfortable up here in these chairs. Cleve can come down for a while, can't he?"

"He's going to have his supper soon. You go down. I thought I'd stay here with him till it was ready. Show me your copy-book, Cleve darling, I want to see how you're getting on with your writing."

George stayed too, but he was somehow made to feel superfluous. Not by Cleve, but by Althea, whose attitude toward her son had never been more fond and motherly. When they left the nursery she said it was time for them to dress for dinner. She made no reference to the business or to the factory and asked no questions. Her manner was tinged with weariness, even with sadness. Well, she was probably tired. Anyone would have been. When they were in her room he asked:

"How are Mary and Francis?"

She brightened.

"Oh, very well, I simply couldn't have found two more perfect companions for a trip like that. There wasn't a single unpleasantness of any sort the whole time. It seems like a lovely dream now. Francis is going straight down to Hawfield; but Mary wants us to dine with her to-morrow night; so you'll see her then. She was really sorry you couldn't come to Florence."

It was the first friendly thing she had said. He put an arm about her.

"Were you sorry, baby?"

She avoided his caress.

"My dear George, you know I was. I did my best to persuade you to come. Don't let's have all that over again."

"I only asked you a question. I wanted to know." He thought it advisable to change the subject. "Did you see any more of Mrs. Tilling?"

"No, we didn't want to. We were quite happy by ourselves. She's a fake, that woman, even if she does know a lot of well-known people. She's a climber. I suppose she's climbed as far as she wants to now, but she's worked hard. Mary and Francis can't stand her."

"There were a whole pile of letters for you in the hall," he said next. "I suppose you found them all right."

"Yes; I read them while I was having tea. There were a lot of invitations. Cynthia Causton is taking a house in Sussex for Goodwood, and wants us to come for a week. That's in July some time, I think. I'll look them over again this evening. Now that the season's begun I suppose we'll be pretty busy. I must arrange some dinner-parties. I wish I'd thought about being presented at Court this year. I can't think why I didn't. It's too late now. Have you seen anything of the Benningtons? I had a letter from Clodagh while I was in Florence. I thought it was sweet of her to write."

"I had dinner with them one night, and they asked me down for a week-end, but I didn't go."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I didn't want to leave London, and I'd promised Cleve to take him to the Zoo that Sunday."

"I think it's a pity you didn't go."

She came into his room in her flowered dressing-gown and looked about her. She saw a new photograph on the mantel.

"Who's that?"

"Don't you recognize it?"

She went closer and examined it. It was a picture of Mrs.

Allgood standing at the door of Mullion. She had given it to George only a few days ago.

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Allgood. Is that her house? It looks quite pretty. Have you become great friends?"

This was more human. George replied with warmth:

"I should say we had. I can't tell you how good she's been to me since you've been gone, Althea."

"Francis talked to me about her," she said, putting the photograph back on the mantelpiece. "I gather from him that she's rather mannish. What are all those books over there?"

"Oh, just things I've been reading off and on," George replied, suppressing a desire to say what he thought of this opinion.

Althea went to the pile of books on the table by his bed—a pile that had certainly not been there before she went away—and examined them.

"*The Decline of the West.* Everybody seems to be reading that. *Life of William Shakespeare* by Sidney Lee. Well, well. More Shakespeare. *The Sonnets. Othello.* We *are* getting on. *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* by William James. I thought you'd read that years ago. Frazer's *Golden Bough,* abridged edition. Why this sudden change? You never used to read anything but the *Saturday Evening Post.* Is this Mrs. Allgood's doing?"

"Mostly," George answered, a little self-consciously.

"I'd better go abroad again, I think. It seems to do you good." She returned to her own room, and he heard her say, "Oh, but I'm tired. My very bones ache. I think I'll go to bed immediately after dinner."

When he had had his bath—he took it first, at her request—he looked into her room to tell her the bathroom was ready, and saw her lying on the bed. The sight moved him. He approached, and bending over her, kissed her on the forehead.

"My darling, I'm sorry you're tired. You'll be all right to-morrow, won't you?"

"Oh, I expect so. Don't fuss, George. You'd better go and get dressed. You take longer than I do."

He went briskly into his room with an air of not minding this rebuff. He had been on the point of telling her his real reason for not going to meet her at the station, but he saw that this would have been unwise.

No, she certainly did not seem glad to be back.

XIV

FOR THE next few days George marvelled, very unhappily, at the power of a woman to make a man miserable without uttering a single definitely unpleasant word or performing a single definitely unkind act. He reflected that the power women had anyway was terrific, no matter how they used it. By their very sex, by their very personalities, by their curious capacity for permeating the lives of men, they were dangerous and despotic, and their goodwill and favour things of almost incredible importance. Somehow, God alone knew how, he had temporarily lost Althea's. He told himself it was temporary, because if he hadn't believed that, he felt he would have gone out of his mind, and the problem of how to win them back obsessed him constantly.

Those eight weeks abroad had certainly made her no happier, and although he realized that the breach had begun—if breach there were—before she went, he believed they would have been happier if she had never gone.

She talked about Francis a good deal, as if she couldn't help herself, or as if, he sometimes thought, to show that she had nothing to hide. He wondered if she got letters from him, but wouldn't ask, and then one day she offered him one to read, and it seemed to be the first he had written to her since their return. There was little in it except comments on English country life, which, under other circumstances, George would have found amusing.

"DEAR ALTHEA," Francis wrote,

"I am being filial at the moment, and spend half my time talking about the garden with my mother and the other half talking about the estate with my father. Sometimes he

and I go for walks together and inspect the different coverts, but one can hardly take a walk in any direction here without smelling dead vermin and seeing rows of pathetic little bodies, furred or feathered, nailed up on a board or swinging from fence rails. The head keeper is a sort of Bela Kun, and smells of blood. My father takes the business of preserving game with immense seriousness, although he's getting too old to shoot himself and knows I care nothing for it. This keeping up of tradition for tradition's sake is thoroughly English, and therefore half admirable and half childish.

"We dine with the neighbours and have the neighbours to dine, and the talk is about as light as the pronouncements of Il Duce for the Press, and about as stimulating as nursery pudding. Whatever was is right; whatever is is dubious; and whatever will be is subversive and dangerous. Both my father and mother are charming and I love them, but I shall be back in London on Tuesday, weary with well-doing and ready for any or all of the sins of modern life. Which reminds me that old Lord Minchinhall, my father's boy friend aged ninety, whose estates march with ours as the saying is, came to dine the other night, and while inveighing, as is his custom, against modern life in all its manifestations, thundered out, 'The whole occupation of the present generation is finding pleasant synonyms for sin.' I congratulated him heartily on this, and told him it was the best remark that had been made in our county since 1886.

"How I miss Florence! Do you? I miss the crowds of street politicians with their black clothes and black eyes, the sun turning the sluggish old Arno from brown to green, the majesty of the Signoria tower, the slim beauty of the Campanile, the cavernous Duomo, the little delicate tender hills, the vineyards, the flowers, the villa, the enchanting company —all of it. Give my best to George.

"Yours ever,

"FRANCIS."

Well, that was all right. That was harmless enough, and if it hadn't been for Althea's too great admiration, he could have liked Francis a lot. He did like him, but with what agonizing misgivings! Anyhow, why did a man want to take the trouble to write entertaining letters to another man's wife, even though there was nothing in those letters that the husband might not be shown? In Althea's case it was certainly mischievous. And suddenly he made up his mind that he would like to talk to Francis, that he would like to put all his cards on the table and explain the situation frankly. He was ready to believe that Francis was unaware of the fascination he exerted on Althea, unaware that he so charged the atmosphere all around him that he was disarranging and disturbing the whole current of their lives, and diverting it from its normal channels.

He couldn't get Althea to take any interest in the factory. She said that he must do as he thought best. The purchase of the site still hung fire, as Mr. Chivers had come down only two hundred pounds, and George knew that if he waited he could get it at his own price, which was five hundred pounds more than he had offered. Meanwhile he lunched once with Mrs. Allgood, and advised her of the general situation.

"Give her time," she said, "to get back to normal. She's feeling that slight depression very often experienced on the resumption of domestic duties. I shall feel it myself when I get back to Mullion, though I confess I'm longing to see William again. I always think matrimony is like a pair of shoes. Go free and barefoot long enough and you'll find they pinch badly when you put them on again. Meanwhile your feet have spread, they've changed their shape a little. But persevere and you'll be able to wear the shoes again without discomfort. Althea's probably feeling the pinch at this moment. So give her time."

George gave her time—and a Rolls Royce. For some months he had been regretting his stubbornness in not having done so when they first came over, for although the Buick

satisfied their every requirement, the fact remained that Althea had set her heart on a Rolls. So when he heard there was a chance of acquiring one that had been used only for demonstrations, at a price well below the original cost price —for even in his most anxious and uxorious moments, George kept his head—he sold the Buick and purchased the other. He kept these transactions from Althea, and explained the hiatus between the sale of the old and the arrival of the new by some talk of repairs. Althea was completely taken aback, then, when she saw Beale sitting, one morning, at the driving-wheel of one of the handsomest cars she had ever seen. George had postponed his departure for the office until she was ready to go out shopping in order to witness her surprise. She was so entirely unprepared for the sight that he thought at first the affair had been an enormous success.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She stood looking at it, with a curious sense of shock and displeasure which she tried to hide. Of delight in this magnificent gift she had none at all. Instead she felt annoyance, remorse and pain. Poor George . . . how she would have enjoyed this six months ago! Now it meant less than nothing to her . . . worse than nothing. It meant another rope around her, another hampering obligation, another worry. She had enough before.

"It would have spoilt all the fun if I'd told you. She's a beauty, isn't she? You wanted a Rolls, didn't you, baby? Well, now you've got one."

She got into the car, with an uncomfortable shrinking feeling. This was deplorable, dreadful. . . .

"I'm afraid you've been very extravagant. If you'd asked me I would certainly have advised you not to do it. I don't feel as I did when we first came over. I've quite got over wanting anything so showy."

"Showy? I'd like to know what there is showy about this car."

He got in beside her, and told Beale to go to Bond Street.

"I don't mean that the car itself is showy. It's lovely, of course, and I do appreciate it, but . . ."

He turned to look at her, crestfallen and hurt.

"My God, but you've changed, Althea. I don't know what to make of you."

"Oh, well, don't worry about that. Some people do change, and I suppose I'm one of them. I don't want the sort of things I used to want. I've learnt that people here don't care whether you've got a Rolls or a Ford if they like you."

"I imagine real people are like that anywhere," George remarked. "And I don't want you to change. I hadn't any fault to find with you before."

She put a hand on his knee.

"My dear George, you can't keep a plant from growing unless you kill it. Wouldn't you like me to take you to the office? It's pretty late. Or would you rather be dropped somewhere? Or will you drop me in Bond Street, and then go on to the office? I don't mind which."

"You'd better drop me in Piccadilly, and I'll take a taxi the rest of the way. Keep the car. It suits you better than it does me, and it's yours, besides. Take it along and show it to Mary, and tell her how bored you are with it."

For some time they rode in silence, without looking at each other. As they approached Bond Street, George tapped on the glass and the car stopped.

"I'll get out here. Good-bye."

"George. . . ."

Althea looked distressed and put out a hand, but he ignored it. He got into a passing taxi and watched the big grey car swing round into Bond Street with Althea, looking very small, sitting in the corner. His brain whirled.

"I guess it's all over. She hates me. She hates everything I do for her. She's completely changed. How is it possible for anyone to change like that? Oh, God! what am I going to do? She's stopped even liking me."

He found Mr. Chivers waiting for him at the office. They met at last over the price of the site, and George closed the deal. It gave him a certain satisfaction to do this. It was something positive and definite and constructive. The building of the factory would be put in hand at once, and would occupy a good deal of his time. He'd be as busy, he told himself, as a one-armed paper-hanger with the hives, and that would be the only thing that would keep him from going crazy. That, and perhaps talking to Francis and satisfying himself, if he could, that he had nothing to do with this change in Althea. He wrote to Francis and asked him to lunch at the Carlton Grill the next day but one, at one-thirty. He did this impulsively and with misgivings, and posted the letter before he could change his mind.

That night when he went home Althea was more cordial, but still reserved and distant. The sight of his face as he left the car had moved her. It was all going to be horribly difficult, but she must try to harden herself. No one could go through what she would have to go through without suffering and causing suffering. She was intensely sorry for George and for herself, but she couldn't make him happy now; she had changed too much. She felt she wanted to take a powerful drug and sleep for several weeks, and then wake to find all this miserable business over. She wanted to avoid quarrels and flare-ups if she possibly could, and say nothing definite until she had had an opportunity of talking it all over quietly with Francis. Her nerves were in such a state that flare-ups would be frequent if she didn't watch herself. So when George returned from the office morose and inclined to be silent, she talked to him amiably, as if nothing had happened, and told him that the car was really a joy, and that Mary had said she was very envious.

This all seemed to George as hollow as it really was, and did nothing to lighten his depression. They dined alone, Althea in an orchid-coloured tea-gown that became her

very well and made her hair look black and her skin like old ivory. George tried to avoid looking at her. He had never before known what agony was. If you lost people by death you hoped to meet them again in another world; you believed you would, if you were a Christian. But if you lost them in the way he was losing her, you lost them for ever and ever, for the bond that kept you together, the bond of mutual love and longing, ceased to exist. So there was no tragedy comparable to this one. What sort of line, he asked himself, would other men have taken? Would they have said, "Look here, if you're hankering after that fellow, if you're preferring him to me, you've got to cut it out, see? Cut it out or get out." Some women might have responded to such a rough-and-ready method, but not Althea. Nor could he adopt it.

After dinner in the drawing-room she was so afraid that he was going to "have it out" with her that she at once took up a book and left him to the evening papers, which he was in no mind to read. The room was still and pleasant, lit only by lamps, and flowers bloomed softly and luminously in the half-lights beyond. It was always quiet there in Wilton Crescent, and to-night there seemed no sounds at all except the hum of a passing taxi now and again. George sat thinking, thinking, while Althea turned the pages of her book. What a mask-like face hers was at times, all closed in, closed down. Her smooth, lowered eyelids were like porcelain, hiding eyes that were for him now like eyes of glass, so unresponsive, so expressionless were they. Oh, where had she gone, his darling? To what remote and unknown regions had that spirit, that had once so quickly and warmly responded to his, retired?

He suddenly threw aside the papers he was holding, and, crossing the space between them, dropped to the floor, encircling her knees with his arms.

"Althea, what's happening to us? What's wrong? For God's sake tell me, tell me? Oh, my darling, I adore you, don't let anything come between us!"

He felt her shrink away and stiffen. Half ashamed of this too emotional outburst, he said more quietly:

"I'm not going away until you've talked to me. There's something wrong . . . pretty near everything's wrong, it seems to me. Why is it? What's happened? Can't you tell me? Can't you?" He pressed her knees and laid his head upon them. "I can't stand this sort of thing much longer."

"Oh, George . . . I wish you wouldn't . . . Grieves may come in any minute." She spoke tersely, breathlessly. "Yes, I know things are different. I can't help it. I don't want to discuss it. Just leave me alone for a while. You'd better, George. Really, you'd better. Just leave me alone."

"I can't. I've got to know what's wrong. You can't treat a man as you're treating me and not tell him anything. Is it Francis Mortlake? Has he made all this difference? Ever since we've been over here, almost . . ."

She seized upon this at once.

"Oh, yes, of course you'll blame it on our having come to England. If we'd stayed in God's country, I suppose everything would have been all right. Well, that's absolute nonsense. People who agree about things could live happily in Timbuctoo. The trouble is we don't agree about anything any more. I love Europe, I love the life here, and you don't. One of these days you'll want to drag me back to America, and I don't want to go. If we had things in common it wouldn't matter, but we haven't, and that makes all the difference. We're just miles and miles apart. You don't change in any way, and I do, I have. I'm happy here and like it, and you're not happy and don't like it, and it's like that with everything."

"Who said I didn't like it here? Who said I wasn't happy?" demanded the stricken George. "I could be happy anywhere where you were, if you were as you used to be. I do like it here. I've grown to like it a lot—more than you know. So it's no good your saying that; it isn't true. As for wanting to go back, I've started to build this factory now,

and that'll keep me here longer. And if I did have to go, I'd leave you here if you liked, if that would make you any happier. There's no reason to go looking ahead for trouble. There needn't be any. Why are we miles and miles apart? We didn't used to be. Who's put us apart?"

In another minute he would speak of Francis again. She mustn't let him speak of Francis. Neither could she go on with this conversation. It was too hollow, too painful. Nothing was wrong except that he was George, and Francis was Francis. No amount of trying on George's part could change anything. There was nothing she wanted from him now. All that was past.

"George, don't let's go on with this argument. We'll only say things we wish we hadn't said."

"I want you to tell me what's wrong."

"I tell you you'd better leave me alone for a while. Perhaps I'm not well. I feel all nerves. I'm sorry I've been disagreeable; it seems as though I couldn't help it. But don't worry me, please, please." She put her hands on his head and tried to push him away. "Perhaps I'm ill. I'll see a doctor if you like. I feel I could fly to pieces sometimes. Only don't bother me, please, George, please." Her voice grew more sharp and imperative.

He clasped her waist as though he could never let her go.

"I won't. I won't bother you, my darling. I love you to death. All this is driving me crazy. Try and get over it. See ten doctors. Go away again if you like. Only don't forget that I adore you, and that you're my whole world. My darling, darling!"

He kissed her wildly, hardly aware of her protesting hands, then left her and went downstairs and out of the house. She heard the front door slam and heard his footsteps die away. That was over. A crisis was temporarily averted. But how exhausting and alarming! She took her book and hurried up to bed. By the time he returned, an hour later, she was sound asleep, and did not even hear him go to his room.

Francis telephoned that he would be delighted to lunch with George, and would meet him at the time and place suggested. For a day and a half George tried, at odd moments, to outline some plan of campaign, but quite unsuccessfully. It had better be left, he decided, to the inspiration of the moment, if any.

He thought Francis was looking very well, very tall and very brown. Switzerland and then Italy had darkened his skin, and this colour became him well. He said he was glad to see George. He was no sooner seated at the table than the head waiter and two lesser ones approached and greeted him. He had been away a long time, they said. They were glad to see him looking so well. How were his Lordship and her Ladyship?

"This is the sort of thing that gets Althea," George thought. "Everyone knowing him and liking him. Well, hell! they used to act just the same with me at the Ambassadors' in New York, only they didn't ask tenderly about my parents."

He felt a little awkward and shy, and began to order the lunch. It was a mistake to have planned this; he'd never get a chance to slip the right word in, even if he could find it.

"A small, simple lunch for me, please, George," said Francis. "May I have an oyster, a cutlet and a cup of coffee? And a glass of beer, if you don't mind."

George said he'd have the same.

"You ought to have come to Florence," Francis told him. "We missed you. Well, if I had a business like yours I don't think I'd leave it either, and I wish to heaven I had. How is it going?"

"Oh, fine," George said. "Better than I ever expected. I'm going to have to open agencies in Brussels, Paris and Berlin later, I guess, and I've decided to build a factory here."

"You'd better give me the Paris agency," Francis suggested. "I'd love to sell something. It's a terrible thing,

George, to belong to a family that has never sold anything. As far back as you like to go the Mortlakes have always been buyers, accumulators. I wish you could see the inside of Hawfield. The last time we had an inventory it took four men five weeks to do it. It suffocates me to think about it."

"It must be a wonderful place, all the same," said George.

"You wouldn't say that if you had to inherit it. Think of having that hanging over you. I'm very fond of my father, and I should hate him to die as it is, but I'd sell my soul for some elixir that would enable him to outlive me. On the day I become Lord Beauvais I shall probably be found with my head in a gas oven."

"Couldn't you sell the place if you liked?"

"Good Lord, no. It's entailed. And I can't let it. Who'd take it? No, if you have tears to shed, prepare to shed them on the day I inherit. I tell Althea this, but she doesn't believe a word of it. Neither will you. That's the worst of you democrats. Only aristocracy will ever put aristocracy in its place. How is Althea, by the way? I wrote to her the other day."

"Oh, she's all right," George said, thinking that this sort of thing was very difficult to cope with. "I think she was sorry to leave Florence."

"We all were. We had a very happy time there," said Francis. "Mary and I had to quash Althea's social yearnings now and again—she hankered somewhat after night-clubs and Mrs. Tilling—but there really wasn't a single incident to ripple our quiet. Even without the charms of Florence I would have enjoyed watching and talking to Althea. Like all American women who have come my way, she's quick as lightning at picking up information. I think they take it in through their pores. Anyone else would go plodding about with a Baedeker, but Althea never looked at one—she had such a horror of being taken for an American tourist—or at

least we never caught her at it, but she was always exceedingly well informed."

"Oh, she's quick all right," agreed George. "I don't know where she gets her knowledge from. We'll go by some house here and she'll draw my attention to it and say, 'That's the Duke of So and So's house,' or 'That's where Prince Somebody stays when he's in London,' or, 'That's where Henry James lived.' It beats me how she gets to know. She doesn't go to any trouble about it either. It's the same thing when we're in a restaurant. If there's a well-known actor or actress in the place, or a famous cocotte, or somebody in society, she spots them straight off. It's uncanny."

"Yes," said Francis, "and she can hear whole conversations from across a room. Women like Althea would be very useful to the Intelligence Department. Well, George, I consider you an extremely fortunate fellow. You've built up a fine business, for the success of which you've no one to thank but yourself——"

"And the aunt who left me the money I put into it," suggested George, modestly.

"Good health, good looks, youth, an enchanting wife and a fine son. And what have I? The awful shadow of Hawfield hanging over me, and the problem of how to live like a white man on a too large income. To anyone who has an eye for irony, the possession of wealth in these days is full of not very pleasing paradoxes. If I'd lived in the eighteenth century, before the development of industry and consciences, I'd have been the happiest of men. I'd probably have emigrated to Virginia, bought a big estate, built a great house on it, kept hundreds of black slaves and imported fine horses, fine wines, fine pictures and furniture and exquisite mistresses, and lived like a king. What a spacious and delightful existence for a man of taste and wealth! Instead of that I was born into the industrial age. Industry! As though there hadn't been industry since the beginning of the world, before the word was blackened by factory smoke. My only consolation

is that I've never ground the faces of the poor. I haven't ground anything. You, on the contrary, probably have a damned uneasy conscience or ought to have."

George laughed at this and answered:

"Well, if anyone can build better office furniture for less money than I can, I'd like to see them do it. And we've never even had a strike at the works in Hartford."

"There you are," said Francis. "Your good fortune is established."

Here was an opportunity that might have been made to order, but before George could decide whether he wished to make use of it or not an even better one presented itself.

"What's Althea doing this afternoon?" Francis asked. "I thought I might take her to an exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts. Do you think she'd like to go, or is she doing something else?"

"I don't know what she's doing," said George, with a feeling of having stepped over a precipice to firm ground again. "You'd better ring her up and find out." To himself he said, "No, I can't do it. I can't possibly do it. I don't know how I thought I could." He added, "I expect if she isn't busy she'd like to go."

No man with an ounce of pride or self-respect, he thought, could have said what he had meant to say. Althea was certainly acting very queerly, but could he hold Francis to blame for that, or suggest to him that he might be to blame for it? It also struck him very forcibly that if he and Althea weren't getting on, that was, of all matters in the world, the most private, the most strictly personal and secret. And he knew he could no more discuss his relations with Althea and her coldness to him at that time and place than he could have brought her there and asked her to undress. And yet half an hour ago he had thought he could!

They talked in the most friendly way about this and that, and George asked Francis to come down to the office one day, which Francis said he'd be delighted to do. He then

asked George when he and Althea could come and dine with him, and George said he'd better consult Althea about dates, so while he waited, Francis rang up Althea, and presently announced to George that he had persuaded her to go with him to the exhibition, and that they were to dine with him the following evening.

"That's fine," George said. "Well, so long, Francis. I've got to get along to the office now."

"Bye-bye, George, old boy. Thanks for lunch. Come and lunch with me at White's one day. We'll fix it up to-morrow night."

He liked Francis better than he had ever liked him before. He couldn't believe there was any foundation for his suspicion. Francis was too open, too natural, too frank, too good a fellow. No, he couldn't believe it.

"There's only one thing to do," he told himself on his way to the office. "Give her another day or two, and then if she's still the same, have it out with her properly. I've stood all I'm going to stand, and a good deal more than I ought to stand. And if she doesn't look out there's going to be one hell of a row."

XV

MRS. ALLGOOD was still in London. She rang George up at his office that afternoon to tell him that she would be there at least another week longer, as William had caught a cold at Pau, and they weren't returning till he was better. She said she didn't want to go down to Mullion and stay there alone.

"Oh, George, how I miss our dinners, and how I miss you! Can't you come in after you leave the office this afternoon, for a few minutes? It would be lovely if you could. Anyway, come if you can. I'll be in."

It was exactly what he wanted. He hadn't seen her for four days. He left the office at five o'clock and hastened to Westminster.

It was a warm day, and all the windows in Mrs. Allgood's sister-in-law's flat were wide open. The mild and gentle air stirred the curtains and the petals of the flowers from Mullion with which the sitting-room was filled. Mrs. Allgood wore a thin dress with transparent sleeves that showed her fine arms. When the maid showed him in and closed the door she held out both hands to him and kissed him warmly on both cheeks.

"Dear, *dear* George! I couldn't have borne it another day. I haven't seen you since lunchtime on Tuesday. When I woke up this morning and realized this was Friday, which is always a grey day for me, I knew I had to see you, and at once."

"I was wondering how I was going to do without you till Monday," George said, sitting down. "Why is Friday a grey day?"

"I don't know, but it is. I've always seen the days of the week in colours, ever since I was a child. Sunday is deep, purplish-blue, Monday is a pale, clear, sky-blue. Tuesday's yellow, Wednesday's red—I adore Wednesday. Thursday is orange, Friday is grey, and Saturday is a jade green. I'm sorry to be arbitrary about it, but that's the way they've always looked to me. Will you have tea, or something stronger? Tea's coming in a minute."

George thought he'd have tea, and the maid presently brought in the tray.

"Tell me your news," said Mrs. Allgood.

"News? I don't believe there is any. I lunched with Francis to-day. We dined with Lady Causton last night. We're dining somewhere else to-night. Is that what you mean by news?"

"Well, lunching with Francis is news. How is he?"

"He's all right. I like him. I can't seem to help liking him. I asked him to lunch with me because I wanted to tell him he was going to be a home-breaker if he didn't look out, but when we met, of course I couldn't say a word."

"Of course you couldn't. I'm glad you couldn't. Are things no better?"

"Worse," said George, and added, colouring, "She locks me out of her room now."

Mrs. Allgood looked startled.

"Oh, my dear George. Really, is it as bad as that? What explanation . . .?"

"Oh . . . nerves. But it isn't nerves. I don't know what it is. She's sick of me, I guess. If something doesn't happen pretty soon there's going to be an awful bust-up. She's polite and says she's sorry, but she just wants to be let alone. It's hell, Kate. There's no other word for it. I haven't wanted anything in the world except to make her happy. Why, I told her the other day that if she was happiest living here she needn't ever go back to America if she didn't want to.

I'm not going to make her. She treats me as though I were spoiling her life, and doing it on purpose. I don't know what to do. We can't go on like this."

"No," Mrs. Allgood agreed. "You must have it out with her. Don't be afraid of her, George. Stand up to her. And if she's really in love with Francis it's better that you should know it."

"Oh, I tried to get it out of her the other night, but she only kept telling me to leave her alone. She isn't happy either, poor kid. I don't know what to do."

Mrs. Allgood poured out the tea, and they talked and talked and arrived nowhere. She wondered, as they talked, how long it would take to kill a love like George's. Years and years, probably. It would die hard, and heaven only knew what, in dying, it might not do to him. Oh, poor George! How well she knew what he was going through. How well she knew that pain under the ribs, under the heart, the struggle between it and the brain to gain the upper hand; the brain trying conscientiously to rationalize, to mend, to put things in order, to save the situation, the pain clawing and tearing like a bird of prey.

She knew there was only one explanation of Althea's behaviour. She was genuinely in love with Francis. She had lost her head. Mrs. Allgood accepted this as a fact, and considered what could be done about it. Nothing. If she chose to leave George, she would. If she chose to divorce him, she would. If she chose to keep Cleve, she would. If she chose to marry Francis, and Francis were willing, she would. George could refuse to let her divorce him, he could keep the boy, it was possible that he might, Mrs. Allgood thought, keep her, for she understood that Althea was not well off, and that she feared her father. But to what purpose? Their married life would be completely ruined, George's position comparable to that of the Ancient Mariner with the corpse of the dead albatross tied about his neck. No, she held all the cards, the little devil, and knew it.

Still, Mrs. Allgood thought, it was silly to condemn her. If a woman has red hair, one does not blame her for not being a blonde or a brunette. Althea was made as she was made: a complicated bit of mechanism driven by fairly obvious ambitions.

"I think," she said, "you must try again, all the same. Bring the thing to a climax if you can. The longer you postpone it, the worse it will be."

"I thought Sunday would be a good day," George said, and then explained, "We're dining with Francis to-morrow night, and that will give me one more chance to see if . . . to sort of watch . . . only Althea's too clever to give herself away, even supposing there's anything to give away. And I don't believe there is, except that she's just bored with me and sick of the sight of me. She's compared me to Francis, and I don't look good to her any more. That's the truth of it. I don't believe there's anything between them. Oh, I don't know . . . I guess there must be. That's the way I go on in my mind the whole time, Kate. I go around arguing with myself. The other day I was reading *Othello*, and I came on one bit that sort of hit me between the eyes. It's where the bird is talking to Iago about his jealousy. You know, he begins:

" 'Why, why is this? Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy, to follow still the changes of the moon with fresh suspicion?'

"And then he says further on—this is the part I liked—

" 'Not from mine own weak merits will I draw the smallest fear or doubt of her revolt, for she had eyes and chose me.' "

He turned his face quickly away from her.

"When I read it," he said, "tears came to my eyes, it was so exactly . . . so exactly. . . ."

They had come to Mrs. Allgood's. She was suddenly overwhelmed with pity for him, with love and anxiety for him, and these had to find expression. She put both hands to her cheeks and looked at him with swimming eyes.

"George," she said, in a small, moved voice, "I do love you so. Don't come near me, stay where you are. I just want to tell you. I know you, and I love you. I know everything you're going through, I feel I know everything you are. The male mind is always so much more comprehensible to me than the female, and generally so much nicer. If you were to talk to me about yourself for hours and hours and hours and hours I wouldn't know you any better than I know you now. Not if you were to turn yourself inside out for me. I don't know what you are to me . . . something very close and dear . . . my child, my friend, you might even be my lover in a sense . . . but oh, you're the dearest, dearest creature. Don't think of yourself as you think Althea thinks of you. She doesn't know, she doesn't know. Think of yourself as I think of you, and be glad of everything you are." She got up. "I think perhaps you'd better go now. Go home, dear George."

He was on his feet, his eyes shining as she had never seen them shine before, as though everything he felt were concentrated there and looking out. He looked like a man who has heard wild and incredibly lovely music, that no one else has heard, or would ever hear. The colour had left his face and there was an expression of great sweetness on it. He stood looking at her with that expression of deep wonder and happiness pouring out of his eyes, then after a silence that rang in his ears he went to the door.

"Good-bye, Kate. I'll ring you up soon."

Ordinary words, but the only possible ones.

She called after him:

"George, George! I'll tell you what I want you to do. I'll be in Sunday evening, alone. If all goes well, I won't expect to see you. If things go badly, come and tell me. I shall be here."

"All right."

He didn't look back, but went straight out and shut the door.

Saturday night was like a feverish dream to George. Mary made a fourth, and they dined at a night-club where they could dance afterwards. As he knew that Francis was not very fond of dancing and that Mary liked it even less, this seemed ominous to him, for it looked as though Francis had wished to talk to Althea without being overheard, knowing that for purposes of speech people are never more alone than upon a dance floor. After dinner he sat trying to talk to Mary and watching the other two. Oh, that tall, fine figure of Francis's, that shapely head, that full chin that would have looked well over a stock, those smiling, inscrutable eyes! . . . George weighed and pondered every attribute of his with a thoroughness that only jealousy could have inspired.

Mary found his attention difficult to keep. Gentle, sad, reticent, she was not the type of woman who could ever have won George's confidence, much as he liked her. She had little more reality for him than a picture. Only Mrs. Allgood who was not there, seemed real to him that evening. He thought of her constantly as he watched Althea and Francis and tried not to bore Mary. That robust and active mind had become for him a sort of harbour, and his thoughts ran to it and dropped anchor again and again. Yes, there was something robust and even animal about her, but consciously and splendidly animal. She once told him that she freely acknowledged the ape at the same moment that she reached for the fourth dimension, and he had remembered it. He had answered, thinking of a tree, that to get up to any height he supposed you had to go a good long way underground, whereupon she had replied that the mind that works quickly and accurately with symbols was capable of a good deal more than selling office furniture.

When they went home, shortly after one, George was as much in the dark as ever as to Althea's feelings for Francis. She had been gay, she had sparkled, she had looked delightful in a new lace dress. She had said sharp and teasing things to

Francis, and he had made provocative replies. They had all laughed a good deal. He had danced two or three times with Althea and she had made pleasant, friendly remarks, and when she had danced with Francis she had not appeared to be enjoying it any more than was seemly. But what had they said? What little secret signs and words had passed between them? He would never know. She said good night to him like a sister, but an indifferent one, and closed her door, and he had turned away quickly for fear he should hear her lock it.

He had asked her what she was going to do on Sunday, and she had said, "Nothing much. Why?" He had answered, "Well, don't make any plans if you can help it. Let's have a day to ourselves." But while he was having a late breakfast in the little morning-room overlooking the garden—it was her habit nowadays to have a Continental breakfast in bed—she came in dressed to go out, and pulling on her gloves.

"George," she said, "I'm going to the service at Westminster Abbey. I've never been, and Francis said he'd take me. Would you care to come, or would you rather read the papers?"

"You might have told me sooner," he said, with careful self-control.

"I didn't think of it till last night, and then I didn't think you'd want to come. There's time if you do. That is, if you hurry a little."

"No, thanks. I'm not coming."

"All right. I'll be home to lunch. Good-bye." Then she turned at the door. "Oh, I forgot to say that I'm bringing Mary home to lunch. She's very depressed and miserable because her husband's ill, and she can't go to see him on account of that woman being with him. She wasn't doing anything this afternoon, and I thought it might cheer her up if we went out somewhere in the car. Will you order it, for about half-past two?"

"Yes; aren't you going out in it now?"

"No; I'll pick up a taxi. Good-bye."

She knew, he reflected, when she had gone, that he wanted to have things out with her, that there was something brewing, and she was trying to avoid being alone with him. She had probably fixed this up with Mary last night. He didn't believe Monash was ill. Mary hadn't mentioned it, nor had Francis. Well, they still had the evening, and he meant to make good use of it. He didn't even look at the papers, but went out and walked from one end of Kensington Gardens to the other, and back again, and every step of the way he talked to Althea. He was furious, he was tender; he appealed, he threatened; he put his hands about her throat and almost strangled her; he picked her up in his arms and cherished her and reasoned with her; he was brutal and yearning, voluble and speechless, happy and ruined. They were reconciled, they were to separate forever; he triumphed, he suffered death.

Althea and Mary were just getting out of their taxi as he reached home. One glance at Althea's face told him that although she might be suffering from nerves, although she might be badly run down, a morning spent with Francis had, temporarily at least, restored her. She looked as alive, as bright of eye as a woman only looks, he told himself cynically, when she has been out with her lover. And that he could make such a cynical reflection as this surprised him, and gave him a sort of bitter satisfaction, for six months ago he would have been incapable of it.

Mary was clearly anxious and preoccupied, and from her own lips he learnt that what Althea had told him was perfectly true. She looked sadder and more wistful, but no word of complaint ever seemed to pass her lips. He liked and admired her, and was sorry for her, but he wished he didn't continually suspect collusion between her and Althea. If she were prepared to stay on to dinner he would have a word in her private ear, but although Althea asked her, when

they returned from tea at an inn near Taplow on the banks of the Thames, she declined, saying she had asked people to dine with her. This convinced George, if he had had any doubts before, that Althea knew quite well what his intentions were and was making every effort to postpone or avoid a dreaded conflict.

During dinner they had very little to say to one another. George's heart was beating thickly all the time, and his voice sounded so unnatural that he dreaded hearing it. He rehearsed in his mind all the conversational gambits that had occupied him in the park that morning and found them all impossible. They drank their coffee in the drawing-room, and as soon as Grieves had taken away the tray and left the room, Althea picked up a book and lay down on the sofa.

"This is the best novel I've read for ages," she said. "I'm not going to put it down till I've finished it."

George, who had drunk his coffee standing by the mantelpiece, put aside his cup and walked slowly toward the sofa.

"Yes, you are. You're going to put it down now, because I want to talk to you."

"But what if I don't wish to talk?" She didn't raise her eyes from the page.

"For once you'll do as I wish, please." He sat down on the edge of the sofa where her drawn-up knees left room for him, and took a firm hold of the book with one hand.

"George, please don't be tiresome. If you bother me I'll go upstairs and read. The sofa in my room is much more comfortable than this, anyway." She looked coldly at him. "Please leave go."

"If you don't put that book down when I ask you I'll take it away from you and throw it out of the window."

She at once released it, and he dropped it on the floor. She made a quick little move to get away.

"Lie still. I've got you just where I want you for once. I want to talk to you, Althea. I want you to tell me what's the matter, and why you're acting like this and making my life and both our lives a hell. What's wrong? What do you want me to do? What's it all about? I want you to tell me."

Her face grew more expressionless and mask-like, and her eyes were as cold and hard as glass.

"I'm sorry to hear I've made your life a hell. You ought to have told me sooner, and I should have known what to do."

"That sort of talk isn't going to get us anywhere. I want a full and honest explanation of your behaviour ever since you came back from Italy. You've acted as though you hated the very sight of me."

"I'm not going to be catechized like this," she protested angrily. "Let me get up."

"No, I won't. Stay just where you are and answer my questions."

He took her by the wrists and held them fast in one hand. Her strength was puny compared to his.

"I'll do nothing of the sort. I won't answer. I won't put up with this. It's ridiculous. Go away, George."

"Why are you behaving like this? Tell me. There must be a reason. Tell me, and then you can get up."

She made no reply, and he shook her gently.

"Althea, we've got to have this out, and we might as well have it out now. I'll be as patient as I can, but you're driving me nearly insane. We can't go on like this any longer."

"Will you let me get up?"

"Will you talk to me if I do?"

"If you talk sensibly. But you've got to let me up first."

He got up from the sofa, releasing her hands, and she was up like a flash. He thought she was going to rush for

the door, and he ran to it, exclaiming, "No, you don't!" and locked it, putting the key in his pocket. This angered her still further.

"It's a pity you did that," she said, with disgust and scorn in her voice and eyes. "I'm not used to this sort of bullying."

"No; you're not. You're not used to anything but adoration and devotion, but by God you've had enough of that from me. You treat me as though I weren't fit for you to wipe your feet on. I'm not going to stand any more of it." He pulled himself up with a great effort, for he knew he was losing control of himself, losing his head and his temper. "Look here, Althea, I want to keep calm and talk calmly and quietly. Help me, for God's sake. This means absolutely everything to me. You don't know what you're doing. You're driving me clean out of my mind. I can't stand it, I tell you. What's happened to us? What's come between us? You've got to tell me. I tell you you've got to. I don't care if it kills me. I've got to know."

She picked up her book from the floor and sat on the arm of a chair, and her face was no longer like a mask, but strained and anxious, and her eyes dilated. This had come too soon, much, much too soon. She wasn't ready. She felt as though she had been driven into a corner. How much was she going to say? How much did she dare to admit? She felt she lacked the support, the backing, which she ought to have had. In a little while she would have known precisely how to act. She had had no opportunity of talking openly and freely to Francis. They had not been properly alone since that afternoon in Florence.

She wanted to keep George at arm's length as long as possible, to establish a sort of frozen No Man's Land between them, and he was making it impossible. And she was sorry for him, terribly sorry. She hated to hurt him, at close quarters. She had meant to deal him the necessary blow at the right time and at a decent distance, so that she could not actually

witness the results. It was one thing to wade through slaughter to a throne, and quite another to approach the throne after the slaughter had been committed off-stage. And all this was agony for her. She had dreaded it all along, and it was even worse than she had anticipated.

"Oh, George, how foolish you are! Why are you trying to force me to say things I don't want to say?"

"Just tell me this, Althea." He was walking up and down the room, trying hard to control his voice, trying to speak as though everything he cared for in the world were not at stake. "Just tell me this, if you can. I don't think you've ever really loved me—anyway, not as I love you—but I think you were very fond of me once, and pretty happy. Anyway, I was satisfied, because I loved you so much myself. Well, something's happened to change you. You admit that. But what is it? What is it? We can't go on like this. I can't at least. What is it, what is it? Althea, what is it?"

He stopped in front of her, his face distorted with misery. Her hardness and bravado left her. This was a terrible, terrible thing to have to go through. She shut her eyes and shivered.

"George, I told you. People do change, that's all. I've changed a lot. I can't help it. I'm sorry."

"I've changed too," he cried, "but not toward you. Not toward you, my darling. Why have you changed toward me? It's because you're in love with someone else, isn't it? It's true, isn't it? Althea, isn't it true?"

He came closer and gripped her shoulders and looked her in the face.

"It's because you're in love with Francis, isn't it? Tell me. You've been different ever since we went to Biarritz last summer. Isn't that true? Althea, tell me."

"It isn't that," she contrived to say, "I tell you I've just changed, that's all. Leave me alone, George. I don't know what's happened to change me. You'd better leave Francis

out of it. And you'd better leave me alone. I warn you, you'd better."

"Leave you alone? How can I leave you alone? You might as well ask me to stop breathing. Althea, don't you know what you are to me? Don't you understand? What do you mean by asking me to leave you alone? Do you think I can go on living under the same roof with you like this?"

"Then you'd better go away," she said, seizing upon this, "or let me go away for a while."

"I can't go away. And you've just been away, and it's made things worse. Are you telling me the truth when you say you're not in love with Francis? Are you?"

"George," she cried sharply, "take your hands away. You're hurting my shoulders. Why are you trying to force me into saying things I don't want to say and that you don't want to hear?"

He said desperately, jerkily:

"I want to hear the truth. That's all, the truth. I don't want you to lie to me. If you like someone else better than you do me, for God's sake let me know it. If you prefer another man to me and would rather live with him, it's no good our going on living together. It's the end. It's the end if you do. Do you see? So you've got to tell me. Never mind about hurting me. It can't hurt much more than the things you've done and said lately. Is it Francis? Are you in love with Francis?"

She turned her face away, shrinking back from his too close scrutiny. She had to think. What was she to say? If she admitted that she loved Francis, George might go to see him. She mustn't be precipitate, she must be careful, careful. She would have to lie and go on lying until they could make plans. She held him away from her at arms' length, head averted, and cried:

"Oh, leave Francis out of it, I tell you. It's got nothing to do with Francis. Leave me alone, for heaven's sake. You'll

bully me into saying something I don't mean in a minute. Let me go. Let me go up to bed. I can't stand this, and I won't stand it. I won't, I won't."

At the first signs of real distress in her voice, at the first hint of breaking down, George instantly relented, and put gentle arms about her, but the instant his vigilance was relaxed, she escaped from him and ran to the door, bursting into tears. She seized the knob and turned and shook it.

"Let me out. George. Let me out, I tell you. I can't stand any more of this. You had no business to lock the door. Let me out."

"Come back," he ordered. "Come back here. I haven't finished yet."

"Well, I have," she cried, "and I want to go up to my room. Let me out. Let me out. I tell you."

She was like a small, trapped animal, and felt like one, and shook and trembled with a longing to escape. But he knew how she would fly up the stairs to her room and lock the door and elude him, and to-morrow wear that expressionless mask again. He'd had enough of that.

"Come here."

"I will not. Let me out, do you hear? How dare you act like this? Let me out this instant. Open this door. Open this door, you bully!"

She was crying, furiously and wildly.

"You call me that, do you?"

He strode towards her and seized her and lifted her in his arms, although she tried to cling to the knob of the door.

"You call me that, do you?"

Anger sent the blood to his head, but the sight of her streaming, distorted face was too much for him. He carried her to the sofa and laid her down on it, melting and softening, and she at once turned on her side, away from him, abandoning herself to sobs.

"Althea, my darling, I can't hurt you. I wouldn't for the

world. Don't cry, baby, don't. Listen, darling, it's all right. You say you don't love Francis, and I believe you. It's all right, isn't it? I believe you. Oh, Althea, my darling, I adore you so. I can't even think about living without you. I can't, I can't. It's a nightmare. It's worse than death, it's hell. Althea, I love you so."

He slipped his arm under her and kissed her neck and her wet averted cheek. He pleaded and humbled himself and confessed his short-comings. He told her how he had suffered and how tortured he had been by doubts. And, as though afraid of weakening, afraid of some treachery within or without, she turned fiercely and like a wild thing pushed him from her and sprang up.

"Oh, let me go, let me go. Don't touch me again. Let me get out of this room. I've lied to you, but I won't any more. I do love Francis, I do, I do. And he loves me. Now let me go. You lock the door and tell me how you adore me when you know I can't get out, and make a mat of yourself for me to wipe my feet on when you've got the key in your pocket. I've had enough. Unlock that door, and be quick about it. I won't stay in this room another instant. Unlock that door. I hate you. I loathe you. Do you hear me? Now, will you unlock that door?"

There was a shrill, wild note in her voice that meant hysteria, but to George she spoke the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth at last. The whole world seemed to drop from under his feet and leave him. With a dreadful deliberation he searched for the key in his coat pocket, found it, and slowly went to the door and unlocked it. His knees shook so that he had to go carefully, and his heart pounded in his ears. He opened the door, and put a hand to his throat, as though he found it difficult to speak.

"I'm going out of this house to-night," he contrived to say, "and I'm not coming back. You can keep Cleve. You can keep everything. You can do what you damned well like. I'm through."

She made no answer at all, but passed him like a dog let off the leash and fled upstairs. She fled as though she were terrified out of her life, and like the report of a gun he heard her door slam.

He could never afterwards remember his actions for the next quarter of an hour, for they were almost entirely automatic. When he found a translation of Plato's "Republic" that Mrs. Allgood had given him, and her photograph in his suit-case later, he was surprised, for he had no recollection of putting them in. Nevertheless he packed enough things for several days, remembering most of the essentials, carried his bag downstairs, and putting on his hat, left the house.

It was a warm and delightful evening, and the little trees in front of the house were rustling pleasantly. Someone at the far end of the Crescent was giving a dance, and he could hear the sound of a too-familiar fox-trot. As he walked along looking for a taxi, his mind kept repeating the words, vacantly. He presently found one and gave the address of his club. He suddenly felt tired, tired as he had never been before in his life; mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted. His very bones ached. At the club he asked for a room for a week or two, and said he would sleep there that night. Having left his suit-case, he returned to the cab and gave the address of the flat in Westminster. He was going to see Kate. He felt like an acrobat in a circus who falls from a sickening height, but knows that there is a net spread under him. But for that net this fall would have meant death.

She opened the door herself, prepared, by the very fact of his coming, for the worst. Was that weary, haggard, expressionless face George's face? Were those listless hands and dragging feet George's hands and feet? It was late, the maid had gone to bed, and she put aside his hat and stick, and with an arm through his led him into the sitting-room, where she poured him out a strong drink. Not a word passed

between them. He did not need to look at her face to see the tenderness and concern in her eyes. He knew they were there, and like a child he gave himself up to her care. She led him to the sofa and drew him down beside her. Oh, this man needed comfort, he needed love. With brimming eyes she kissed his hair, and took his head in her arms.

XVI

ALTHEA FULLY realized when she woke the next day to the tune of curtain rings slid along the rods—a pleasant noise on most mornings—that George had precipitated things in a most unfortunate and inconvenient way. The light-filled room was so terrible to her that she covered her eyes with her hands and cried out, "Not so much light, Cotter. My head aches. Draw the curtains again. I'll just have tea this morning, with nothing to eat. And tell Grieves I want to see her presently." The maid went quietly out, and she lay wondering what was the matter with her. She felt unbelievably depressed and miserable, and her depression was not lightened by the discovery that not only her head but her whole body ached, that her throat was sore, and that she felt decidedly feverish. She was evidently in for something—a bad cold, if nothing worse. She had felt chilly motoring in the afternoon. She wondered if she could have had a temperature the night before, and whether, if she were to tell George this, they might not be temporarily reconciled. But worried and anxious though she was, she put this thought aside.

She wanted to act as decently as possible. Hers was not an easy role, and she wished to play it respectably and in order. At least she had been honest with George; she had not attempted to deceive him in any way, as other women would probably have done. He could say nothing against her except that she had grown to like another man; a thing that might happen to anyone. She supposed he had gone to his club, and she hoped with all her heart that he was not suffering too much. Poor George! Her eyes smarted, and she had to tell herself not to cry; it would make her worse

and redden her eyes and give things away. But she was terribly, terribly sorry for him. It was always a tragedy when one loved and the other merely liked.

Grieves brought in her tea, and Althea took the tray from her and laid it on her knees.

"Grieves, I've got such an awful headache. I feel wretched. And Mr. Goodall was suddenly called away last night on business." She pressed a hand against her forehead. "A telephone message came for him about half-past ten, and he packed a bag himself and went. He may be away for some time, and in that case we'll have to send him some more clothes, but we'll know later."

"Oh, very well, madam. I'm sorry you're not well. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"You might call up Dr. Maryot presently and ask him to come and see me. And tell Mrs. Thompson I shan't want any lunch or dinner, just soup, perhaps. Tell her to order whatever she needs for downstairs. And will you ring up Mrs. Monash about half-past ten and tell her I think I have flu, but as soon as I know it's all right, I should very much like her to come and see me."

That was over. Her explanation of George's absence would serve for the present. Later the truth would have to come out, but not yet. If only she had been able to keep him quiet and at a distance a little longer! She was utterly unprepared for this crisis, now that it had come, for she had had no opportunity of talking, really talking, to Francis. Since Italy she had only seen him three times. Once at the Burlington Fine Arts Exhibition, where there was a crowd; the night they had all four dined together; and yesterday at the Abbey, the least suitable place of all. And now George had pulled everything down about her head and left her in the ruins—and with a temperature.

She would have to ask Mary for the name of her lawyer. Heavens! What a business it was all going to be. One thing was certain: she was in no fit state to take any steps now.

She must first get over what ailed her. If she were feeling better, she would write and tell Francis the news to-night or to-morrow morning. Her poor head! The tea revived her a little, and she presently got up dizzily, and went to spray her throat.

Later Grieves came and told her that the doctor would be there between twelve and one, and that Mrs. Monash was already out when she telephoned, but that she had left a message. Althea tried to sleep, hoping the aspirin she had taken would help her, for her half-awake thoughts were disturbing and grotesque, and presently she did slide into a restless unconsciousness.

The doctor said it was certainly influenza, and advised her to stay in bed several days and see no one. He suggested a nurse, and Althea, who felt she wasn't ill enough but would enjoy having one, agreed. If George should hear of it, through Mary perhaps, he would be anxious about her, and that would help to take his mind off his own troubles. She told Grieves to send word to both Francis and Mary that she was laid up with the flu, and abandoned herself to the business of being ill, with a thoroughness that kept her from troubling about the things she had to do, and made the nurse say she was the best patient she had ever had.

And when an enormous bunch of red roses came from Francis, with an affectionate note, she lay and feasted her eyes on their loveliness, and allowed herself to visualize a not-far-distant future that she had not, until now, trusted herself to contemplate.

When her temperature sank, her worries returned. If only George weren't such a man of one idea. If only he weren't so terribly wrapped up in her. If only he would pull himself together and be philosophical, and not suffer too much. After all, plenty of his friends had gone through the same thing. Half the people they knew in New York had divorced or been divorced, and had survived it. And generally they found suitable partners the second time, and were happier. As for

Cleve, she would, of course, let George have access to him as often as possible. Everything would be all right. They were only doing what plenty of other people had done. She was a fool to worry so. Little by little the quiet, pleasant nurse, the sun filtering through the blinds, the red roses, all helped to comfort and reassure her, and on the third day her temperature was normal, though she still felt weak.

No word, of course, had come from George. He had not even sent for more clothes. He must have taken a couple of suits and a plentiful supply of shirts, she reflected. As soon as she was obliged to tell Grieves to pack up his things and send them to the club, the secret would be out. She was not sorry that this necessity should be delayed a little longer. She had had a short note from Mary saying she would come as soon as the doctor allowed visitors. What would she say, Althea wondered when she knew that George had gone and that she and Francis would certainly marry as soon as a decree could be obtained? Good friend though Mary was, she neither invited nor made confidences, and Althea had not hinted at the state of affairs, partly because of this reticence, and partly because such plans thrived best, she believed, in secret.

On Wednesday afternoon, sitting up in bed, she wrote a letter to Francis. She wrote it quickly and confidently, putting the words down as they came into her mind. She began:

"Francis dear, come and see me as soon as you can. I'm better to-day, so come to-morrow afternoon, about four. Something very important has happened, and I think your premonitions are proving true. George left me on Sunday night, and is never coming back. He insisted on 'having things out' with me, and I told him the truth. I'm so thankful it's over. It was a terrible thing to have to go through, but it's past now, thank heaven! I broke down myself, and the next morning I had a high temperature, and had to send for

doctor and nurse. I sent word to you by Grieves that I was sick—it was all I could tell you then. Your roses are wonderful and still perfectly fresh, and I have revelled in them. Oh, Francis I've got so much to tell you, and you're so utterly worth going through this awfulness for! To-morrow, at four o'clock, I may still be feeling weak and looking pale, but never mind.

"Yours always,
"ALTHEA."

She read this through and found nothing wrong with it except that she had said "sick" instead of "ill." So she re-wrote it and asked the nurse to go out and post it at once.

That done, she turned her attention to *The Times*, which she had not yet opened. It was her habit to read the personal items, and then the births, marriages, and deaths before looking at the news, and she did so now. The births and marriages had no interest for her to-day, but as she ran her eye down the death column, she suddenly stiffened. Monash . . .! Could it be Mary's husband? Yes . . . "On the 16th instant (yesterday!), suddenly, aged 48, Lt. Col. Richard Walsingham Monash, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., of Hope House, Rushleyworth, Acton, Somerset, only son of the late Col. Humphrey Walsingham Monash, at a London Nursing Home, following an operation. Interment private."

Good heavens! Mary's husband. Poor Mary . . . but what a blessed release for her all the same. She mightn't think so, of course; she seemed to cherish hopes that he might come back to her or repent or something, but all her friends would rejoice, anyway. What was she feeling? Had she been with him when he died? Or had that other woman monopolized even his last moments? What a pity she herself was ill, and couldn't be with her. Reaching for pen and paper again she wrote!

"DARLING MARY,

"I've just seen the news in to-day's *Times*. My dear, I simply don't know what to say to you, and whether to be glad or sorry. Of course I'm sorry for him, and for you, if you're sorry, and I suppose you must be. Dear Mary, I'm longing to see you, and help you in any way I can. Come and see me or ring me up. I can't go out for two days yet, the doctor says. I do wish I could do something for you. I've been through a crisis myself that I'll tell you all about as soon as I see you. George has left me for good. But I won't bother you with it now. I'm better to-day, but still weak. I can only send you my dearest love and sympathy and curse this flu, which has made me so helpless.

"Always your loving,

"ALTHEA."

This must be posted at once—or better still, Cotter could deliver it by hand. She rang and gave orders to this effect. Poor Mary . . . but at least she would find comfort in her religion, and in that way, Althea considered, she was fortunate. What changes had taken place in both their lives within the last few days!

Suddenly she felt very sorry that Colonel Monash had died at this particular moment. It diverted attention and sympathy from herself to Mary, and although she didn't in the least begrudge it to her, she was badly in need of it herself. She was playing a lone hand, and was in need of all the advice and counsel she could get. Especially from Francis and Mary, her two best friends in England. And Francis might feel it his duty, in view of their long friendship, to help Mary first.

When the nurse came back she was surprised to find her crying weakly.

An answer came from Mary the next day, but there was nothing, yet, from Francis.

"DEAREST ALTHEA," Mary wrote,

"I can't believe you've seriously quarrelled with George. He must be utterly miserable. May I ring him up at his office, or mayn't Francis? Or better still, won't you? Do, Althea. He will take an estrangement from you so terribly hard. Don't leave it another moment, but write or ring him up. Quarrels are pathetic and futile, and leave scars, and I cannot believe there was any good reason for it. George is such a dear.

"It was sweet of you to write so promptly. I feel bewildered at the suddenness of it, and haven't found myself yet. Francis has been so good and helpful. I don't know what I would have done without him. He was hurrying between here and the nursing home all day yesterday and the day before. Mrs. Ladislaw was with Dick at the end, and as he didn't want me I couldn't and didn't go to him. He was operated on for acute peritonitis, but he had been in bad health for some time, I now hear, and Mrs. Ladislaw says had been drinking heavily for the last year. I don't think she'd had a happy time. I like to think she was really fond of him and wasn't actuated by hope of gain, but it's hard to understand the mind of a woman like Mrs. Ladislaw, and she was a Slav, besides, which makes it still harder. Poor Dick's life was a sad failure, and I must share that failure, for though I did what I could, it was not nearly enough.

"I may not be able to go to see you for several days, there is so much to do, but when you're well enough, come and see me. And I implore you, my dear, to make it up with George, and *at once.*

"With my love,

"MARY."

Certainly this death had happened most inopportunely. Althea rose up from her bed at two o'clock that day without having heard one word from Francis, by letter or telephone. She couldn't even be sure that he was coming. She was still

weak, and was sorry to see the nurse go. She sent for Cleve after lunch, but he got on her nerves by repeatedly asking for his father in front of the nurse.

"Has he gone to build the factory? When can I see it? When is he coming back? Why didn't he tell me he was going?"

She grew impatient with him, and asked the nurse to take him out. He might come to see her for a few minutes before he went to bed, but he was not to trouble her with questions.

She tried to read, but was continually listening for the sound of car or telephone. Five o'clock came, and there was still no sign of Francis. In a mood of bitter annoyance she rang for tea, and tried to convince herself that he was too busy doing things for Mary that no one else could do. Even so, he ought to have sent word. And suddenly, for the first time, fear entered her heart, as sharply and inexorably as a driven dagger. For some agonizing minutes she gave herself up to it, and her hands and forehead grew moist with sweat. Oh, *no!* It couldn't be *that.* Of course he cared for her. Why had he singled her out at Biarritz, among hundreds of other attractive women? Why had he been so attentive to her in London? In London, where he was the most popular and eligible of bachelors? Why had he gone to join them in Florence when he might have gone to fifty other places? Why had he made love to her there? Why had he done and said the hundred and one significant things he had done and said? Why had he taken her to picture galleries again and again and given her the books he liked? There were innumerable reasons for knowing that he loved her, and only one for fearing that he did not, and that could be explained by the fact that Mary was his oldest friend and needed him, which was really quite understandable. She grew gradually calmer, and she made a great effort to pull herself together, and presently got up from the sofa and went to the mirror to see how she was looking, and then to the windows, but there was no sign of that commodious old car.

She heard the distant sound of the telephone, and trembled. It was all she could do to keep herself from running to it. Grieves came and announced that a message had come from the American Club to say that Mr. Goodall would like his clothes and personal effects sent on there as soon as possible.

Grieves delivered this with averted eyes. Her manner was subtly different. She seemed to be looking away in order that Althea might not see how perfectly well she understood. With an inward sinking, and a disappointment too keen and bitter to be fully realized till afterwards, Althea told herself that it had to come soon, so why not now?

"Very well, Grieves. Tell them it will be seen to to-morrow. That will be time enough." The two women stood there, avoiding each other's eyes. "That will be all, I think," she added.

Grieves said, "Very well, madam," and went away again. They would all know downstairs, Althea thought—Grieves and Cotter and Mrs. Thompson and even the kitchen-maid. The nurse was on a plane apart, and Althea proposed telling her herself to-morrow. Oh, why, *why* hadn't that message been from Francis? How could she bear this waiting? How could she bear it? She had to fight her way through a thousand terrors. She clung now to the thought of his roses and the affectionate note that had come with them. He had been all right then. Why not now? She hardly knew how many days had gone since George had left the house. They had seemed to march slowly and spectrally past, each one exactly like the other.

The last post that evening brought a letter from Francis. Grieves brought it to her, while she sat in the drawing-room, alone in the long twilight. As soon as she had gone, Althea slit open the envelope with a little cry of relief and satisfaction. Oh, at last, at last! Oh, the balm of having it actually between her fingers! Oh, Francis, Francis . . .! Then, as she read, frowning lines appeared between her eyebrows and her lips tightened.

"ALTHEA DEAR," Francis wrote,

"I have had your letter with me for nearly twenty-four hours without answering it, and hardly knowing how I was to answer it as it should be answered in the midst of the spate of grim duties I have had to perform for Mary. I am going to find it very difficult to express all that I want to say to you. My dearest Althea, you offer me something so lovely and so dazzling that I am nearly blinded by it, and, such is the sad irony of life, I've got to put it away from me. A few hours after reading your letter I happened to run across George at his club. I have never seen such a change in a man. He looks utterly broken, utterly forlorn, as though he had seen the collapse and ruin of everything he cared about in this world. I have been haunted by his face ever since. Althea, we mustn't do this to him. We mustn't, and we can't. You've always known how much I liked George. I honestly think him one of the best fellows I have ever known, and it didn't take a clairvoyant to see how he adored you. If it had been any other man, if his love for you had not been so great and so obsessing, it would have been different. But when I looked at that haggard, miserable face, with all hope and life gone out of it, I felt like a murderer. My dearest Althea, forgive me for what I am going to do, but I know that if I were to follow my inclinations in this I would be dealing such a blow to someone I admire and like that I could never think even tolerably well of myself again. You and I cannot do this to George. It would be like killing a devoted dog by slow torture. I bitterly regret the part I have played in bringing that look into his face. I am only thankful that it is not too late for you to make him as happy again as he was before, and I know you will. Our love for one another has been a most exquisite experience, one that I never can forget. You are the most charming and lovable of women; you will always be able to command love wherever you go, and from whom you please.

"Will this end our friendship, I wonder, or can we still

meet and find pleasure in each other's company? It is for you to say, my dear. Meanwhile I am and shall always be,

"Your devoted friend and servant,

"FRANCIS MORTLAKE."

She read this letter through again and again, aghast, shocked, anguished. Every nerve in her body protested passionately against this tame renunciation, this chilly nobility. She was wounded, shaken, unconvinced, and presently angry and suspicious. It wasn't good enough. No, it wasn't good enough. It had a hollow ring. It fell lamentably short. It was laboured. It was pleasantly false. *She was being let down as gently as Francis could let her down.* She knew this with an awful, inner certainty, a certainty that froze her blood. It was almost as though she could hear him say, as indeed he did say:

"Mary, I've got to lie myself out of this as decently as I can, God help me. She's a charming person, whatever her follies may be, and I like her, I'm fond of her, and I'm entirely to blame. I mustn't hurt her, or I must hurt her as little as may be. She's worth lying for, and lie I must. I've acted stupidly, crazily, unforgivably. And now I must lie, and lie like hell."

Something of this filtered through his letter. It was as if love and anxiety and suffering had temporarily sharpened those senses that are called psychic, and she *knew*. And she knew, too, that Mary had had something to do with it, that Mary was somewhere in the background of it.

Then her fighting spirit rose up in her. She had too much at stake to submit quietly to this. How dared Mary interfere? How dared Francis point out her duty to her? If she could bear to hurt George as she had hurt him, what right had they to meddle? That was her business, not theirs. She rang for Grieves.

"Grieves, ring up Mayfair 00880 and leave word that I particularly want to see Mrs. Monash, and that I'll be there at

four o'clock to-morrow if that time is convenient for her."

Grieves returned to say that it would be quite convenient, and Althea tore Francis's letter into a great many little pieces and flung them in the basket. She went up to bed with a white face and wide, angry eyes which she never closed till the sparrows began chorusing in the trees outside and the first early footsteps sounded in the street.

She was trembling with nervousness and excitement when she entered the little hall of Mary's house and went up the stairs to the drawing-room. It was a room she had always loved. It had panelled walls of periwinkle blue, charming pieces of walnut furniture, and eighteenth-century paintings of old London. The memories of all the happy times she had had in that room comforted and soothed her, and when Mary came down, the two ran into each other's arms and kissed affectionately.

Mary looked very lovely in her dead black, and though she looked sad, she seemed less worn and pale than Althea had expected. She held Althea's hand and led her to the sofa.

"My dear, what times we've both been through, and in the same week."

"Poor Mary. I'm so sorry about it all. It's tragic. Don't let's talk about me, yet. Tell me about yourself."

"Oh, there's not very much to tell. It's been pretty ghastly. The funeral was yesterday. It was quite private, and very painful for me. Mrs. Ladislaw, of course, was there. I hardly knew myself which was the real widow. I don't think I could have got through it without Francis and Father Walters. But, Althea, I've thought about you so much in the midst of all these things. Tell me about George. Did you write to him, as I begged you to do?"

Althea flushed, a thing she had not done for years, and replied, her heart beating thickly:

"Mary, I tell you George and I have separated, for good. It's quite final. I couldn't have gone on living with him any

longer. I didn't love him and I couldn't make him happy. It simply wasn't possible." She looked Mary straight in the face. "I'm in love with someone else . . . can't you guess . . .?"

Mary brushed this aside.

"My dear, you're making a dreadful mistake. Don't tell me any more. It's a mistake, I know it. It isn't on religious grounds that I say this—I never apply my own views about marriage to other people's affairs. You're not a Catholic, so you're free to consider a divorce if you like. But in this case it's a terrible mistake. You'll kill George. He adores you. Do something before it's too late. Let me go to see him, let me ring him up if you won't. I'll do anything. Althea, I implore you: please, please!"

The two women were sitting close to one another on the sofa, and Mary took Althea's hands and held them tightly, her great blue eyes full of urgency and distress.

"But, Mary, I can't go on living with him. It isn't decent. I tell you there's someone else. Don't you know . . .?"

"No, I don't want to know. I'm not going to guess. You're making the biggest mistake of your life. It would be terrible for you to separate from George for this. How can you do it so lightly, on such poor grounds? If you listen to me, if you listen to your friends, you won't do it. Don't, for your own sake, for George's sake, for all our sakes. Ring him up now, at once. Oh, Althea, I implore you."

There was something burning and compelling in her look, something so urgent that Althea grew more and more frightened, and her suspicions sprang up again and grew like weeds.

"You're quite wrong if you think I'm doing this lightly. I've been through a terrible time, worse than you'll ever know. And whatever you say, I can't and won't go on living with George. I won't."

"Oh, why didn't you tell me you were going to do this?

Why haven't you confided in me a little? Oh, Althea, I wish you had."

"I'm not good at such confidences, I don't know why. Mary, you must know who it is. You do know."

Mary gripped her hands more tightly.

"I beg you not to name any names. I don't want to know. I want you to send for George. I know what I'm saying. I have good reasons for saying it. Send for George."

Althea felt that they had fenced long enough, that they were getting nowhere. And a still more horrible suspicion entered her mind.

"Why are you talking like this? Why mustn't I divorce George? What do you know?"

This frantic opposition on Mary's part wasn't, couldn't be, inspired wholly by liking for her or George. There was something more compelling and powerful behind it. A premonitory shiver ran through her.

"Mary, you're hiding something. What is it?"

"Oh, Althea, only listen to me. It doesn't matter who or what you're doing this for. It wo' 'l be the most terrible folly. No woman has ever been better loved than you are. You'll bring misery on yourself. I know it. I'm so fond of you, I can't bear to see you hurt. And you will be hurt. Oh, how can I make you see?"

Althea was suddenly inundated with the blinding white light of knowledge. She pulled her hands away and shrank back against the cushions. She stared at Mary, her eyes cold and hard and full of hate.

"It isn't of me you're thinking. It isn't for *my* sake you're making all this fuss. It isn't for George's either. It's for yourself."

Mary sighed and put her hands over her eyes. Her whole body relaxed.

"Althea, try to understand, try . .

Then Althea leaned toward her and seized her wrist with nervous, agitated fingers. She cried:

"You're in love with Francis Mortlake yourself. You've been scheming against me, against my happiness. You've been talking to him about me. I know it. You and Francis have been discussing this between you. You want him yourself. Isn't that the truth? Tell me!"

A look of pain crossed Mary's face. She bit her lips, as though to keep back tears.

"Don't, oh don't say things like that. It's partly true. Francis did tell me. He was in great distress . . . he had to come and tell me. Oh, Althea, Francis has been in love with me for years and years. . . . Oh, my dear . . .!"

Althea felt as if someone had pressed a bell and rung all the pains in her mind and body. She sat there, dumb, in an agony of mind too great for speech or movement.

"It's no fault of yours that this has happened," Mary went on. "I've been blind, wrapped up in my own thoughts. I didn't see. I never dreamt you felt as you did. I knew you liked Francis. Everyone does. And he liked you. He was charmed with you. He may have made love to you. I expect he did. Men give in to such impulses so much more easily than we do. They can't help it. But if he did, try to forgive him. With your knowledge of men you'll understand. He is partly to blame, I am partly to blame, you not at all. I lose myself in dreams and visions and ignore what goes on around me. Or else I'm light-hearted and gay and don't think at all, and imagine that other people share my mood. I wouldn't have had this happen for the world. Oh, Althea, forgive me . . . look at me. . . ."

But Althea was looking stonily away, her face like a mask. Francis had gone straight to Mary after getting her letter. He had asked her help and advice about getting out of the difficulty into which she had put him. They had talked about her, with pity or with scorn. Then he had written, with Mary, perhaps, looking over his shoulder, that lying letter. Oh, agony! Her thoughts flew back to Florence. They had invited her to come to Florence—the occasion of her first

quarrel with George—so that they might be together without talk. They had used her as a convenience, as a screen. For all she knew, Mary might have been his mistress all the time. How could she possibly know that she was not? They had had a whole existence of which she knew nothing, a hundred secrets from which she had been entirely excluded. They had been closely and intimately in each other's confidence, and she had been completely outside. Colonel Monash was only just in his grave, and already they had probably talked of marriage. Mary would be the Honourable Mrs. Mortlake. Some day she would be Lady Beauvais and have Hawfield Place. And while she had been lying ill they had been discussing her behind her back, and all the time she had been going through the agony of breaking with George they had been having their secrets, from which she was entirely shut out.

They had exposed her to shame. She had been made a fool of. She had never been an intimate of theirs, never. They had only let her think she was. They had let her believe she was at the very core of their liv. that they had accepted her as one of themselves, and all the while they had had their secrets, of which she knew nothing.

She pushed away Mary's detaining hands and got up, trembling.

"Althea," Mary cried, "you mustn't go like this. You mustn't."

She made no answer, but went toward the door and paused, with her hand on it, to collect her strength and control herself. Then she went out of the room and down the stairs, without heeding Mary's low, imperative cry, "Come back, Althea, please, oh, please!" She went out of the house, got into the waiting car and told Beale to take her home.

What a rotten world! What a hideous, futile life hers was! She was as ineffectual as a shade. No one considered her or cared about her. George had given her up with hardly a struggle, Francis had made love to her as lightly and

unmeaningly as he would have smoked a cigarette. She was finished with them all. She would find another place for herself, another life, other friends, somewhere . . . anywhere. . . .

She had loved Mary and Francis, quite apart from her special love for Francis. They had seemed to her superior beings, and their acceptance of her had seemed to lift her up and set her apart. And now, what was Mary? People called her *spirituelle*, a mystic. She was only a worldly, scheming woman. And what was Francis . . .?

She became, for the time being, her lowest, smallest self. She indulged in hate, in ideas of revenge, in schemes to humiliate them. She would tell everyone she knew who knew them that they had been living together for years and that she had just found it out and dropped them. Probably Colonel Monash had had very good reasons for leaving his wife. Why, he was no sooner in his grave, than . . . Evil thoughts she had not known she possessed rose up in her and obsessed her. She had not realized she could command such hate. Weak with the violence of her emotions, she went straight up to her room. The first sound she heard was the moving of trunks and the opening and shutting of cupboard doors. She looked into George's dressing-room and saw Grieves and Cotter hard at work, and a great trunk of George's half packed in the middle of the floor.

"You needn't do any more packing," she said. "Mr. Goodall has changed his plans and will be back to-night or to-morrow. I want a hot bath, please, with plenty of salts, and I'll have my dinner in bed. Tell nurse I won't see Master Cleve again to-day. I don't feel well enough. I think I went out too soon."

She lay in a hot bath, as hot as she could bear it, and breathed the scented steam. Oh, how good to lie and think of nothing, and relax every muscle! Presently she was between the cool sheets of her bed, and lying back on the pillows, she scribbled a note to George.

"DEAREST GEORGE,

"I'm just recovering from a sharp attack of flu. Dr. Maryot has been five times, and I had to have a nurse. I think I must have had a high temperature on Sunday night. I know I felt feverish and queer and talked and acted like a crazy woman. Of course I'm not sending your clothes to the club, because I know you'll come back. Please, hurry George. I still feel weak and exhausted, and I do need you.

"With love,

"ALTHEA."

She sent this off by special messenger. Then she tried to sleep, but the spectre of her humiliation and shame stalked and postured and grinned before her eyes. It was as though all the world has seen her walking naked down Bond Street. Oh, God! Why had this thing happened to her? Why, why? Tears welled into her eyes and ran down on the pillow, and though she tried to keep them back they came faster and faster and for more than an hour the bed shook and trembled with her sobbing.

XVII

THERE WERE letters on her tray the next morning from Mary and from George. She looked at them through swollen heavy eyelids and opened George's first—and with more eagerness than she had ever felt before in opening a letter of his.

"MY DEAR ALTHEA,

"Thank you for your note. I'm sorry you've been ill, and I hope you're all right again now. The reason I particularly wanted my clothes is that I'm going down to Mullion this week-end, and hadn't enough, but I bought myself some shirts and things, and I guess I can manage now. Unless you change your mind about wanting to see me I'll be home Monday night in time for dinner.

"Love to Cleve,

"Yours,

"GEORGE."

Down to Mullion to stay with Mrs. Allgood! That didn't sound like a broken-hearted man. He'd probably been having a very good time the whole week. Oh, but the world was rotten, rotten! It was extremely probable that Francis had never even seen him. She wished she had died of influenza before writing that letter to Francis, before seeing the complete destruction of all her hopes and illusions. But under her confused, petty, tumultuous feelings she suffered deeply and poignantly, as though her heart were bleeding itself to death and she could do nothing to stop it.

Mary's letter softened her a little. It was kind, affectionate, generous. She told of Francis's twelve-years-old devotion

to her, how he had implored her to divorce her husband and marry him before she became a Catholic, but how she had been swept on and away by a flood of religious feeling. She told Althea how genuinely fond they both were of her, how unhappy Francis was about it all, how anxious they were to make up to her for any hurt they had caused her. She implored her to put George out of his misery at once, and to come and see her, and let everything be forgiven and forgotten.

Althea's eyes, swollen already with much crying, smarted afresh as she read this. But every "we" that Mary used, when she spoke of Francis and herself, stabbed her. No, she could never see them again. No, no, it was over, all over. She could never see Francis again . . . never, never . . . and she had to go on living somehow. . . .

She went shopping in Bond Street that morning in the hope of changing her thoughts, and ran across Mrs. Tilling, who explained elaborately why she was in town during a week-end. Moved by some obscure impulse, she asked her to come home to lunch with her, and Mrs. Tilling, moved by another, accepted, and sending away her car, went back to Wilton Crescent in Althea's. She was charmed with the house, charmed with the pieces of furniture Althea had bought, and with her taste generally. She asked after "that lovely Mrs. Monash," and "the Honourable Francis." Had Althea seen them lately? Oh, yes, only the day before yesterday. She told Mrs. Tilling, who had only just returned from Florence, about Colonel Monash's death.

Mrs. Tilling, it appeared, was soon going to New York to visit her daughter.

"You must meet my daughter Ruthie—Mrs. Vantuyl—when you go back, Mrs. Goodall. She's one of the gayest, prettiest, smartest young matrons in New York, though as her mother I suppose I shouldn't say it. Of course you know what the Vantuyls are. They've always been leaders of New York society since the year one. Ruthie has a lovely apartment, decorated by Sutz, and she gives the most delightful

musical parties. She knows all the really important musical people, and they love to play for her. Are you fond of music? Ruthie says the opera was marvellous last winter. They never had a better season. I was quite sorry to have missed it, but alas, one can't be in two places at once. I think young people like Ruthie have a gayer time in New York than they have here, but I think London is better for women of my age. Don't you miss New York sometimes?"

No, Althea had to confess that she didn't.

"But I've had such a marvellous time here, and everyone's been so kind. And now George is building a factory over here, so there's no telling when we'll go back. But when we do, I'd love to meet your daughter. Of course I have friends who know her."

"London society isn't exclusive any longer," went on Mrs. Tilling. "When I first came over and was presented, one knew everyone, and everyone was worth knowing. Now it's open to all and sundry: shopkeepers, manufacturers, American nobodies and even people from the Argentine. The willingness to buy and dispense champagne in large quantities seems to give the *entrée* anywhere to-day. But in New York there is still a little kernel, a little core, that isn't to be got at by every comer with a long purse. And my daughter Ruthie is fortunate enough to be in the very centre of it."

Her flat and rather flaccid face took on a complacent look. She adjusted her eyeglasses and took a mouthful of alligator pear salad. Her clothes were perfect and as youthful as Althea's. Her hair was neatly waved under her smart little hat and confined by a fine net, which gave it a carved look. Althea perceived that she wasn't really intelligent, that she wasn't really likeable, she was only shrewd and lucky and certain of herself. Nevertheless, she saw no reason for not cultivating her. She had always wanted to know Mrs. Vantuyl, and now she made herself very agreeable to her mother. So much so that she was asked to dine in Grosvenor Square on Sunday night. Mrs. Tilling had an extra man

coming, so it didn't matter about Mr. Goodall being away, though of course she was sorry and hoped he would come another time.

When Monday came, Althea decided to dress for dinner before George arrived, and she took great pains over her toilet. She put no colour on her face, preferring her natural paleness, which, if she powdered and didn't even redden her lips, always made people ask her if she were ill.

George's feelings, as he drove home in a taxi with a large suit-case and some parcels, were confused. He had been through hell, there was no other word for it. Only Mrs. Allgood had saved him from some sort of destruction, and now he had to act as though nothing much had happened. She had urged him to accept Althea's letter as an apology and an excuse, and not to look too closely into the whys and wherefores of it.

"She probably did have a fever on her," she said.

George remembered her complaining of feeling chilly in the car, but said she had looked all right.

"It's an explanation you had bet[illegible]accept, George," Mrs. Allgood advised. "You may never get a better one."

Grieves was delighted to see him again, and showed it as far as she was able. There had been a good deal of restlessness and uncertainty downstairs, and now that he was back the house seemed to settle down firmly on its foundation once more, and their little world resumed its normal course.

George, trying to sort out his confused feelings, was aware that a resentful soreness was not the least of them, and this he wanted to get well in hand before meeting Althea. The past week had "taken it out" of him. He felt he was not the same man, and he had a suspicion that he never would be. He felt older, wiser, more tired, less optimistic, more complex. Things had happened to him, things had been done to him, another woman had taken her place in the foreground of his life alongside of Althea, and this had given

him a kind of double vision, as though he could never again see one without seeing the other.

This last week-end, with Professor Allgood resting in bed and Miss Emmaline Allgood rather pointedly effacing herself, he had spent a good deal of time alone with Kate. She was like a deep well into which he could everlastingly let down the bucket of inquiry and draw up the cool clear water of her common sense. Her frankness and clarity of mind were barriers against folly. He could so easily have fallen in love with her—in a sense he believed he had—but she had talked him out of it. She had shut her eyes to nothing, and had opened his to everything. Sex, he discovered, was as decent a topic to her as tulips. Her mind was a refreshing wind from whatever quarter it blew, and it blew from most. She returned him to London on Monday more than ever her adoring friend, but nothing else. And as, in his unhappy state, he had been led to think of death as he had never thought of it before, he now knew that were he to die he would like Kate to be beside him.

Well, whatever happened, as long as Kate was in England and he was there too, he could get something out of life. As long as he had her to turn to, it could never be barren. Whenever he thought of England now he saw Kate. Whenever he thought of Kate he thought of England.

And so, thus changed, thus made complex and divided, he went up to the drawing-room and opened the door. Althea was there with a book. She sprang up and came toward him with a pretty movement of draperies and extended arms. She was very genuinely moved.

"Oh, George dear . . . please forgive me. I'm so sorry. I think I was mad. It wasn't any of it true. I just felt distracted and feverish. I didn't know what I was saying. Forgive me."

She put her arms under his, and locked her hands across his firm back. They embraced each other closely, tightly, and kisses and looks and little murmured words passed between them.

In a low voice, tonelessly, George asked:

"Then it isn't true about Francis?"

"Oh, no, oh, no! We're nothing to each other. I don't care if I never see him again. That's true, George."

"All right, all right. I believe you. You look pale still. I guess you were pretty miserable. Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I don't know. I felt so awful. I thought I'd done something that could never be undone." She cried a little, clinging to him. "Oh, George, it's been awful for me, and I know it has for you, too!"

"Never mind," he said, and patted her back gently. "Never mind. How's Cleve?"

"He's all right. He's wild to see you. Shall we go up to him now?"

"Yes, let's go up now."

Althea realized that evening that George would need careful handling. He was still sore. They had been torn apart for a while, and he still suffered from the wounds of separation. He was a slightly alien George. But in a few days everything—except her own secret and internal pain—would be the same as before. The same, with a difference. For her world, that had lately been so brilliantly coloured, was now drab and dull.

She made no effort to see Mary, and even left her letter unanswered. She couldn't write. She shrank like a snail that is touched with a stick at the very thought of Francis. No, she could never see them again. They could never meet any more. Those doors were closed, and none that were open were attractive to her. The Benningtons were dears, but they lived in the country and rarely came to London. At Cynthia Causton's house she might meet Mary or Francis. She knew plenty of other people, both English and American, but she wasn't particularly interested in any of them. She felt languid and listless; her vitality had temporarily ebbed. Everything seemed an effort. She felt no desire whatever to read or

improve her mind by listening to music or looking at pictures. What was the use, now? Who really cared whether she did or not?

But one evening at dinner she happened to say to George that she simply must go to an Exhibition of French pictures in a gallery in Pall Mall. To her amazement, he said:

"Yes, you ought to go. They're worth seeing."

She looked quickly at him.

"How do you know? Have you see them?"

"Yes," he answered. "I went in one afternoon between five and six. It's the only time I have for that sort of thing."

"Did you go alone?"

"Alone? No; Mrs. Allgood took me."

"Oh." She pondered this for a while, and then asked, "Do you often go to exhibitions with her?"

"No; not now. She isn't in London enough for that. But when she comes up for the day we go sometimes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Oh, I don't know. Is it very important? I didn't think you'd be particularly interested."

"Well, I never dreamt you'd leave the office early to go and look at pictures. Why don't you ask me to meet you sometimes? How funny you are!"

"I always thought you thought I was too darned ignorant to be any good to you. Well, I am; but Mrs. Allgood's kind to morons like me, so I go with her sometimes."

"Yes, that's all right, but you might have asked me if I'd like to go." She added, "Mrs. Allgood never liked me, I know."

"Well, she didn't think you liked her."

Althea was a little disturbed by these meetings with Mrs. Allgood. How often did he see her? Did they lunch together as well? It was quite probable that they did. Everything contrived to unsettle and upset her. She was conscious of an independent attitude of mind in George that she was quite unused to. She had tried to create a No Man's Land between

them, and now she found there was one. She remembered what Francis had said about Mrs. Allgood that day on Vallombrosa, and the memory of this did nothing to allay her fears.

She began to ask George questions about the factory. How long would it take to build? Didn't he find it rather irksome attending to all the necessary details? Now that he had done the actual organizing of the London business, wasn't the routine becoming a little boring?

No, George said he didn't mind it. He didn't particularly care about excitement in business. He liked to get things running smoothly and efficiently and then keep them like that.

"But surely, once the thing's properly started anyone can do that. You've done all the spadework now. I should think the rest would be dull for you."

"I guess anyone could do it," replied George; "but I happen to be on the spot."

And a day or two later, she said:

"I wonder if Howard Peters has got over his disappointment at not coming over here last year? I suppose he thinks we're pretty selfish to have stayed so long."

"I never meant to stay less than a year," George said. "And now, as I told you before, I don't care how long I stay. So you needn't worry your head about that."

"Oh, I'm not worrying," she answered.

She wondered, and continued to wonder, at the tact and reticence he displayed in not speaking of Francis or Mary. A short while ago he would certainly have blundered into questions. "Say," he probably would have asked, "what's become of Mary these days? I thought you and she were as inseparable as the Siamese twins." But he now made no reference to them. He had "sized" the situation up in some way satisfactory to himself, and there he meant to let the matter rest. But he had sized it up in a way that, had she known it, was far more flattering to her than the truth. He supposed she had fallen in love with Francis, that she had not meant to confess it, until he forced her to, that she had,

in the end, been unable to endure a final break with him, with all that it meant, and that she was now trying to put Francis out of her life, and with Francis, Mary, to see whom could only be painful. So George thought, and if she had been obliged to find an explanation that in no way hurt her self-esteem, she could not have devised a better one.

He was sorry for her, but he supposed she would get over it in time, and he saw no reason why he should be the only one to suffer. But as the days went on and her listlessness increased, he began to be more sorry for her than for himself. He had Kate to go to. When he couldn't see her he wrote to her, and she wrote to him. She gave spice and zest and interest to his life. Althea might not think so darned much of him, she might have called him back only because she feared to let him go, but Kate thought the world of him. In her frank and open way she loved him, and this was highly stimulating. Althea, meanwhile, had nowhere to turn for comfort. She had sent Francis away—she assured him she had not seen him since that dreadful Sunday, and he believed her—and now she took very little pleasure in anything. And this began seriously to concern him.

One day Sherman Halsey announced his arrival in London, and invited himself to lunch. He particularly asked that there might not be a party, and Althea, pleased at this compliment to herself, took great trouble over the menu.

The squat, Buddha-like little man came and kissed her hands. Since last seeing her in the winter he had been yachting in the Mediterranean; he had stayed with a famous Greek financier at his winter home in Morocco; he had been to Berlin on a mission that required secrecy; he had had a private interview with the French Premier; he had listened, unofficially, to some disarmament talk in Geneva; he was in London to attend an important bank meeting in connexion with a merger; and he was returning to New York at the end of June on important business, and to see his mother, aged eighty-seven. Between then and now he was going

back to Paris to buy some pictures and to add to his collection of Chinese porcelains some fine pieces that had just come into the market.

Althea marvelled that so much activity, energy, ability and zest for life could exist in that small, badly shaped body, in that round, undistinguished head on which the thinning hair lay in careful stripes. He was like an engine for ever under full steam, yet his manner was suave and quiet, his movements well controlled. His Oriental look was more noticeable than ever. He was like a sort of high priest of finance, art and society. He wanted to know how long they were staying in England.

"For ever, I think," said Althea. "George seems to have put forth roots."

"And you blossoms," he said, looking at her admiringly. What might she not have been if she hadn't had a good, quiet, conscientious business man for a husband? To go far in society, especially in Europe, a woman needed to be footfree. She must be seen now in Scotland, now in San Moritz, now in Cannes, now in Bayreuth, now Paris, now London. He believed that Althea was perfectly fitted for just such a life. Well, well, he had done what he could for her. He was quite ready to do more. She was a charming, pretty creature and had done him credit. Mary Monash, when he last saw her, had enthusiastically praised her. Cynthia Causton, Francis Mortlake . . . they had all found her highly attractive. He had done right to introduce her to them. If they ever decided to go back to New York, he said, they must let him know. Had she ever met his friend Ruth Vantuyl? No, Althea said, but she was very friendly with her mother. Oh, yes, Mrs. Tilling, of course, was well known everywhere. But she should meet the daughter, a real social force in New York.

He complimented her on her cook. He had thought that such an omelette could only come from the hands of a French chef.

"I do think she's good," Althea agreed. "I asked her the other day if she'd like to go back to America with me, and she said she would. Of course it would mean trebling her wages and probably losing her to one's best friend, but I think it's worth trying."

Sherman Halsey made her feel clever, charming and a connoisseur. When he had gone she reflected that he would be as good as his word, beyond a doubt. If they went back to New York she could meet anyone she liked. Anyone.

And her listlessness turned to restlessness, and her vague desires took form and became purposes.

Cleve unexpectedly helped her. For two days he was so naughty that the nurse lost her temper and told Althea it was time he went to school. Althea repeated this to George, who agreed. He'd been thinking that for some time, he said.

"Well, I didn't want him to go to school till we got back to America," she explained. "I think it's so bad for children to be changed about from one school to another all the time. And besides, do you want him to be an English boy or an American boy? It doesn't matter to me as long as he's a nice boy, but you know how impressionable children are at his age. It's just as you like, but I think we ought to consider that."

George felt that here they were on somewhat difficult and delicate ground. He had seen enough of English children to be impressed by their general good manners, good sense and good health, but if Althea put it like that, of course he had to admit that he wanted his son to be an American.

Not long after this she said that she was afraid her father's health was a good deal less satisfactory than he was willing to let her think. He wrote fairly cheerfully, but into his letters she read something that made her anxious. He must be very lonely, and she supposed she ought to think about taking a trip over to see him soon.

"How would it do, George," she suggested, "instead of going to France this summer, to go home instead? We could

go straight down to Long Island and stay with your mother, and father could come and take that cottage near us as he did that time three years ago. Then we could look out for a school for Cleve. I don't think that's at all a bad idea."

"Well," said George, "if we do that we might almost as well stay over altogether, it seems to me. It's a long and expensive trip, just for a holiday. I don't think it would be worth it."

"Just as you like," she said, carelessly, and turned away.

This gave George a good deal of food for thought. She clearly wasn't as happy in London as she had been. He suspected that she was still suffering from that break with Francis. He missed Francis himself, and Mary too. It took time to get over these things, but surely it was a question of time, and nothing more. But what if she were finding it increasingly difficult not to see him? Had he really examined the affair closely from her point of view? Francis was still in London. All she had to do was to go to the telephone. . . . She might run across him any day in the street. Wasn't that pretty much of a strain? Wasn't it also pretty damned dangerous? Perhaps she was perfectly well aware of the danger, and feared it. How was she going to forget Francis as long as she lived in the same town with him? She might be reminded of him daily in a hundred torturing ways. He hadn't really stopped to think what she might be going through. He had been so miserable himself. Even his home-coming had been full of bitterness; it was, whatever face they tried to put on it, a sad anticlimax that was satisfactory to no one.

He wrote to Kate and laid the situation before her. She wrote back:

"DEAREST GEORGE,

"You're not to go. I can't possibly spare you. My life isn't gay either. Why is everything done for selfish women? Well, I'll be selfish too. You are necessary to my happiness,

and I will not let you go. And I haven't half finished your education. Oh no, George, seriously, I can't bear this. Don't ask my advice, for I won't give it. I only think how happy we are when we're together, and what a blank your going would make in my life, and my instinct is to fight for you tooth and nail. You're much too precious to me. I need you, and you need me. Be firm. Why should you go? I'm coming up on Friday with a long list of errands, and a visit to pay, for William, to the British Museum, but I hope to lunch with you. If you have anything more to say about this I have arguments that will simply pulverize you. Good-bye till then.

"With my blessings,

"KATE."

"P.S.—If it's the only way for you two to be happy, together, of course you must go, dear George, but oh! how I shall hate it!"

Meanwhile Althea was becoming more and more conscious of changes in George. She was conscious of another influence at work, an influence that was shaping him inwardly in ways that would show more and more as time went on. She was also aware for the first time of a judge in him, a judge capable of weighing, sifting, deciding upon evidence, and in matters that had nothing to do with business; capable, moreover, of passing judgment upon her. She began to feel forlorn and unprotected, as though a great wall that had once sheltered her from the wind of criticism had been taken away.

Another woman had "discovered" George. She couldn't, here and now, begin discovering him herself. She would have felt like a foolish echo.

She had only one card to play, and she played it. She refused invitations, said she hated the London season, and sat in the house or in the little garden with a book, looking pale and miserable. She visibly pined. This was no faked state of mind: she felt like that, and what ordinarily she might

have concealed, she now displayed. George became alarmed, and one evening after dinner asked her if she really would like to go back and see her father and spend a few weeks on Long Island.

"To stay?" she asked.

"Well, we'll see about that. I'm entitled to take a holiday in July or August, so we'll just go if you like, and decide when we get there."

"My dear George, we can't possibly do that," she said, with a return of her old crisp manner. "We must decide now. There's the house to put in order and sublet, and there's my furniture to be packed and sent over if we mean to stay. You forget that."

Yes, he had forgotten it. A compromise wouldn't do. If they went they might as well go for good.

"But, George, dear, I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do. I'm not going to urge you."

The days were long now. They spun themselves out until nearly bed-time, and George liked to imagine how the shadows would look creeping on and on across the fragrant, smooth and vivid lawns of Mullion, while the birds sang their last loud, clear songs against a deepening silence. They sat talking in the drawing-room, and the french windows that led out to a little iron-railed balcony were wide open to admit the languid air. The sky was flecked with small pink clouds, like homeward-bound sheep that the red sun had caught. Althea had just had to decline an invitation from Cynthia Causton for a week-end at Whittleworth—"Do Come. I think it will be a nice party, and Francis Mortlake has promised to come too. . . ." Her lassitude and depression at dinner had been most noticeable.

"But, my darling, it's you who matter," George said. "It's no good staying on here if you're not happy. I can't be happy either. What would you like to do? Go back? I can fix it up all right. Don't worry about that. Would you really like to go back?"

He had begun walking about the room, his hands in his pockets. She suddenly got up from her chair and went to him, putting her arms about his neck. The wide, loose sleeves of her chiffon dress fell back to her shoulders.

"Oh, George, I do want to go back. I don't know what's the matter with me. I feel like a lost spirit. Even a lovely, lovely day like this makes me want to howl. I feel as though I were on the brink of melancholia. Don't you think perhaps we'd be happier if we went? I feel as if things were coming between us. I know it's my fault. But don't take me back unless you really love me, and care what happens to me. Do you still love me, George?"

"Look here, baby," George said, "you know I love you so just cut that out. I can't be happy anywhere unless you are, and you know it. I'll make myself into the wandering Jew if it'll do you any good. Nothing's going to stand in the way of our being happy together if you want it as much as I do. Nothing and no one." ("Oh, Kate!" his spirit cried out in an agony of renunciation, "I've done it now. I've said it now. This is the end for you and me.") "So if you want to go, we'll go. You know it doesn't make any difference to me where I live, as long as I have you and Cleve."

She pressed her face against his shoulder. He could hardly remember when she had shown him so much love.

"I think it would be better for me if I went away."

He shut his eyes for a moment and then said:

"All right. When?"

"Early next month, I should think. That will give us time to arrange things here. Don't you think so?"

"That suits me all right. I'll cable over to the firm tomorrow. I guess Howard Peters can come over and take my place now without any trouble. He'll jump at it."

"Perhaps in a couple of years," she said, raising her head, "we might think about coming back again."

"Oh, we'll see about that. No use making plans now."

That night, half asleep, her over-excited mind busied itself

with a thousand fantastic and bizarre images and visions. In one of these she saw herself in a box at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. Mr. and Mrs. Louis Vantuyl were there as her guests, and at the back of the box, in the shadows, were George and some decorative and charming young men. She was looking radiant, superb. One of the young men leaned nearer to her and said, "Who are those two people staring up at you? Do you see them?" She looked down and saw Francis and Mary. "Oh, yes, they're Lord and Lady Beauvais. I knew them in England. Nice people. I must look them up this week if I can find time." She gave a cool bow and smile and looked away as the curtain rose.

XVIII

FROM THAT time on, Althea lost her wistful languor and became brisk and active. She put the house in the hands of various agents, and began, with her old energy and clear-headedness, to make preparations for the return journey. Meanwhile, George carefully controlled and concealed his feelings under a cheerful and optimistic exterior. He was determined not to disclose what he felt, never, indeed, to disclose it until the time came, if it ever did come, when he and Althea could reveal their feelings to one another freely and openly. Not one word about that week in June ever passed her lips, and George was equally silent about what he had gone through then and was going through now. Strange intimacy of marriage, he thought, that was no intimacy at all. He realized that with Althea he was one man, with Kate quite another, and this inner duality which he had only just discovered, puzzled and interested him. Kate's trips to London grew more frequent. He looked forward eagerly and with longing to their lunches together and to an occasional half-hour when he slipped away from the office to meet her in the lounge of the station hotel for a cup of tea or a drink before her train left. She faced that journey of an hour and a half each way cheerfully. William was writing again, and frequently needed books of reference from the London Library, or required the verification of certain statements from authorities only to be found at the British Museum, and these errands Kate willingly performed.

Then one week-end, a few days before they sailed, George went down to Mullion. Althea had also been asked, but she refused, first because she knew it was the last time George would see Mrs. Allgood, and she could well afford to be

generous, and also because she preferred to spend the week-end at Whittleworth, having ascertained that neither Mary nor Francis was likely to be there. So they motored down together on Saturday morning, stayed within seven miles of one another, and went back to London together on Monday.

The Allgoods were soon to take their annual trip to Aix, and Professor Allgood was looking forward to it to relieve him from the pain he was now enduring. It was always a sad trial for Kate to leave the garden at its loveliest but she made no complaints. She accepted all the trials of her life, except one, philosophically, and that one was the loss of George.

This she hated, this she fought, admitting all the while that she saw its necessity.

That week-end was hot and bright. The grass was less emerald now, all the brilliance had gone into the sun and the sky and the blazing herbaceous borders. They left William in his study and went to walk in the woods where the trees made a high cool screen and the wood-pigeons cooed drowsily.

"Oh, let me fight, let me argue, let me complain," she cried; "I know it's too late now, but it's an outlet for my feelings. I'm losing something I know the full value of, and though I won't lose it utterly and in every sense—for you'll never forget me—that's chilly comfort for me."

"We've got to get some comfort out of this somehow," George said.

"Yes, we've got to, I know. Well, yours will be that you still love Althea, that you can look forward to a time when she'll be closer to you and fonder of you than she's ever been yet—and I do believe that time may come—and that to take her away from the things and places that remind her of Francis is the only sensible thing to do. Now tell me, if you can, what comfort I can find? Not a shred, and you know it."

with its propped-up branches, at the old oaks and elms, and the high old brick walls, with their espaliered fruit trees, and everything seemed to him so divinely lovely that it added to his heartache. They said little to one another. George said he thought that Mullion was his spiritual home, and she replied:

"Then try to come here in spirit sometimes and comfort me."

She led him to the car, for it was time to go, and each saw in the other's face that almost unbearable look that comes with an acute consciousness of loss, of emptiness-to-come.

"Remember what I told you, George," she whispered to him. "Don't get fat. Promise me, promise me you won't. I couldn't bear that."

He smiled back at her. "I won't. Don't you worry." And each turned quickly away and Beale started the car. No waving of good-byes, no looking back. George couldn't look back, and he knew he wouldn't see her face if he did. They drove through Britwell Beeches, that lovely village, and he didn't even see it, or know that it was there.

XIX

THE *Olympic* carried comparatively few cabin passengers, for the tide of travel was all the other way. Sherman Halsey was on board, his departure having been delayed for a week by an (entirely unofficial) visit to Rome.

Cleve, a more self-conscious and less friendly child now, had forgotten him, and preferred being with his father. So while Sherman Halsey told Althea in confidence a number of unofficial secrets that he had told to a good many other people in confidence, George, hand in hand with Cleve, explored the ship and talked to the crew. It was a cool and bracing voyage, with agreeable head winds of no great violence, and George enjoyed it, and began to feel a return of confidence in the future. He thought a great deal about Cleve, his own smaller self but with as yet unsuspected and unknown variations and differences, and about what he would like him to be and do. He wasn't going to let him be a hundred per cent American. No one ought to be a hundred per cent anything, it left no margin for that wholesome reaching out of the mind toward those things that are not confined within the boundaries of any one country. He thought he might perhaps take him to England again while he was still a boy. He might have a year or two at a public school or a university; say Cambridge. And he could spend the holidays at Mullion! He played with this idea, and it pleased him. He might go into the business later, but only if he wished. It was no more natural or necessary for a boy to like his father's business than to adopt his father's taste in cigars. The business was there if he liked it.

When they were in sight of the most amazing skyline in the world, George was moved in a variety of ways. There

it was again, that unique old skyline, and here he was again, and only he knew with what changed eyes he looked upon it. During the long delay that would inevitably interrupt their further progress—pilot, quarantine, customs—he turned Cleve over to Althea and went below to write a letter to Kate.

"DEAREST KATE,

"We're in sight of the New World now, and I'm blessed if it looks as good to me at the moment as it ought to. I've been away long enough to change, and not long enough to get a thrill, but I guess I'll feel differently in a day or two. Anyhow, that's what I keep telling myself, and it's probably true. We've had a peaceful trip. I always enjoy being on the ocean, and I've also enjoyed being with Cleve every day. He's a companionable little kid now, and not nearly as crazy about strangers as he used to be. I haven't talked to a soul outside of Althea, Cleve and Sherman Halsey, that great man. He's all right, I guess, but a little of him goes a long way with me.

"I've done a lot of thinking since we left Southampton, but I don't know that it's got me very far. I'm in a transitional stage at the moment, and everything is in a state of flux except my feelings about you. And I woke up the other night and felt the most awful pangs because I suddenly saw a lot of things and people I'd got fond of getting smaller and smaller and smaller, and further and further away. (Not you, Kate.) You'll smile when I tell you what some of them were. They were places like Hyde Park Corner, and the back of the Horse Guards, and St. James's Park, and the Zoo, and the Carlton Grill, especially the corner of it where I had lunch with Francis that day. (That's crazy, isn't it?) The drawing-room in Wilton Crescent, the view from Westminster Bridge; Kensington Gardens, where I used to take Cleve on Saturday afternoons, Mullion, the grimy old office in the grimy old city—I was fond of it, all the same—and then

people. Grieves coming to the door, or brushing my hat, a sort of wide-eyed look Mary Monash had, and her long fingers, all sorts of people I'd got fond of, too many to name. People like me ought to keep moving or else never move at all.

"Well, I'll settle down here, all right. And I know I did right to come back. And pretty soon I'll be stepping on to subway trains as though I'd never done anything else, and getting my drinks again the way I told you, and discharging Olson for being cheeky and then taking him on again because he's such a darn good chauffeur. But in a lot of ways I'm going to be different, and stay different, and only you know what those ways are.

"Don't you forget that monthly list of books you promised to send me. I'll be looking out for it, and if I don't get it there'll be trouble. And don't you get the idea, Kate, that I'm pessimistic about the future, because I'm not. And I can tell you exactly why I'm not, but that'll have to keep for another letter.

"Pretty soon we'll leave the ship and cross the gangplank, and the last material link with you and with the life over there and the past year will be broken. But I'm not even going to think about it. There'll be too many other things to think about, and I guess it's lucky there will.

"For everything you are, for everything you've been to me and done for me, I'm the most grateful man in this world And grateful's such a poor sort of word that I'm ashamed to use it. And I know this: that I couldn't wish Cleve any better fortune than some day to meet a woman like you, who'll be to him what you have been to me.

"GEORGE."

How inadequate, he thought, how poor and crude! But she'd know what he had tried to say as well as if he'd said it. She'd know what he was feeling. He sat for some time with

his head in his hands, then suddenly looked up and drew some more paper towards him. He began to write down, for his successor, some of the facts and details in connexion with the London office. He wrote at the top of the sheet:

"GOODALL & CO.
"*London Office*, 129B LOMBARD ST., LONDON, E.C.3.
"Personnel of staff now on the premises. . . ."